A DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS FOR THE 21st CENTURY CHURCH: INTEGRATING SANCTIFYING THEOLOGY, SPIRITUAL FORMATION, AND NEUROPLASTICITY IN DISCIPLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

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by
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United Theological Seminary, 2025

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According to their annual data,[1] membership within United Methodists of Upper New York has been declining for the past ten years. This decline is due to deficient pastoral and laity leadership, lack of understanding of sanctifying theology as to the depositing of the Holy Spirit, and the absence of effective discipleship strategies. Within this context this project investigated the relationship between pastoral spiritual formation and developing member retention strategy. The project found that in rediscovering the Wesleyan ethos of sanctified theology pastors can better understand their missional context and create a continuous, transformative, intentional discipleship journey.

[1] "NFD pastors gathering," Mentimentor, 2023, https://www.mentimeter.com/.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Mack and Dr. Miller, my cohort directors, thank you for opening your hearts to work with an Afro-Caribbean Puerto Rican. I assume it may have been your first time, and I hope it will not be the last. Our journey was arduous, complicated, and filled with turbulence, but thanks to your unwavering dedication and determination, I stand here today with the project in hand.

Georgia, your encouragement, your ability to empower me, and the way you helped me believe in my own talent were truly exceptional. Your magical mind worked wonders in editing my document, seamlessly weaving my Spanglish into every submission without stripping it of its weight or validity. Georgia, thank you.

To the UNYAC Cabinet team, its Bishop, and the entire pastoral community that gave me the opportunity to serve you, thank you. You transformed me into someone capable of confronting his fears, phantoms, and uncertainties, enabling me to stand here today and declare: “We made it together.”

To the pastoral team that believed in my gifts and talents, those who chose to walk alongside me because they believed in me—you know who you are—thank you from the depths of my heart.

DEDICATION

To Marta, my beloved wife, my life companion. Many describe their wives as "their better half," but I have declared and will always declare you, with all my heart, as my best two-thirds. Without you, this project would never have materialized or been completed. Your patience, perseverance, and remarkable skill in working with challenging and exceptional people has crystallized in my life. Thank you for pushing me beyond the limitations that for so long had seemed insurmountable. For more than two-thirds of my life, those chains had been there, but your love and unwavering belief in me set me free. Thank you, Marta, because your support has been the greatest gift God has given me for this journey.

I also dedicate this work to the woman who intertwined my being within her womb and shared with me her unconditional love, her dedication, and her profound connection with God. Mami, I love you with all my heart. Thank you for a lifetime devoted to shaping and guiding me into becoming a man of God. You formed me within your womb and prepared me for this moment through your prayers and unwavering faith. Thank you for your secret prayers: "Lord, take my wisdom and give it to Carlito." Though many women may have sweet and loving voices, my being is deeply attuned to the tone of your voice and the tender melody with which you call me: "Carlito."

To both of you, Mami and Marta, my eternal gratitude. This achievement would not have been possible without you. This triumph is as much yours as it is mine, because

your hands, your hearts, and your prayers have shaped my life and my purpose. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

ABBREVIATIONS

3Ds	Discover, Develop, Deploy
3Ls	Loving, Learning, and Leading
BOL	Board of Laity
CCC	Charge/Church Conference
CFTL	Christ Following Transformation Leaders
CLM	Certified Lay Ministers
CLS	Certified Lay Servants
CPUMC	Central Park United Methodist Church
DA	District Associate
DCOM	District Commission on Ministry
FCUMC	Four Corners UMC
GC	General Conference
IDP	Intentional Discipleship Plan
JJCC	Jehovah Jireh Community Church
LS	Lay Speaker(s)
MAP	Ministry Action Plan
MIS	MissionInsite
SLI	Spiritual Leadership Incorporated
UNYAC	Upper New York Annual Conference

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am worried they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast to both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out

--John Wesley, *Thoughts on Methodism*

INTRODUCTION

From 2018 until 2024, I served as a district superintendent for the Upper New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church (UNYACUMC). Between established churches and new faith communities, I supervised an average of 109 ministries. Like other traditional denominations, The United Methodist Church in general, as well as our particular conference, is on a downward spiral, losing thousands of members annually. Like the larger church, my conference has continually confronted and overcome a myriad of challenges which stem from evolving sociocultural shifts that have occurred over many years. Despite its commendable historical tenacity, the UNYACUMC stood at a crossroads in the contemporary age, marked by rapid transitions and increased cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. The pivotal question arose: in light of the gospel's transformative message, how could the Conference ensure not merely its survival, but its flourishing and revitalization in today's context?

Project Hypothesis

Faith communities that intentionally cultivate an active pursuit and profound dialogue with the Holy Spirit within their sociocultural context develop a heightened spiritual and cultural sensitivity. This sensitivity enables them to design and implement a structured, dynamic, and transformative discipleship model. This project’s hypothesis is that a transformative discipleship model, grounded in spiritual formation, progressive

sanctification, and the renewal of the believer's mindset and conduct, fosters increased participation, ecclesial cohesion, and active engagement in congregational life.

As these communities establish sustainable discipleship practices—such as prayer, biblical study, fellowship, and service—believers develop habits that reinforce their identity in Christ and their ability to embody and relationally model the gospel. Further, from a neuroscientific perspective, the repetition of these spiritual disciplines not only strengthens spiritual transformation but also influences the believer's neuroplasticity, fostering cognitive and behavioral changes aligned with a life of holiness. This cognitive and behavioral transformation enables believers to internalize and apply gospel-centered values and principles within their communal and societal contexts.

This project further posits a secondary result. Communities which undertake this process will experience organic and sustainable growth, not merely in numerical terms but through the expansion of relational discipleship, where spiritual formation cultivates believers and leaders capable of reproducing the process in others. This dynamic distinguishes communities that prioritize spirit-led discipleship from those that rely solely on structured methodologies without fostering deep spiritual transformation in their members.

Project Formulation

This project sought to fuse theological concepts with scientific and research-based approaches, focusing particularly on cognitive science and the disciplines of neurology and neurotheology. The project's objective was to understand and enhance the sanctification process among believers. It evaluated the interplay between spiritual life,

formation, and neurological development in the believer. In addition, the project designed a discipleship model grounded at the crossroads of science and theology, which structures, complements, and strengthens the sanctification process.

Ministerial Strategy Development

This project's discipleship process was responsive to specific ministry context. It emphasized the importance of listening to and discerning God's will in the environment served, allowing participants to be challenged and led by the Holy Spirit. By intertwining insights from neurology and neurotheology with practical theology, this project aimed to offer holistic and well-founded tools for the formation and sanctification of believers in contemporary ministry.

Overview

The project context and focus is presented in the first chapter, explaining the background and context of the Upper New York Annual Conference. Chapter one concludes with a discussion of the project's impact on the mission and vision of the conference. Chapter two explores the biblical foundations for the project, relating thesis questions to an exegesis of Acts 19:1-7. Acts 19:1-7 not only describes a historical event but also offers a theological model for discipleship and the expansion of the church in challenging contexts. The exegesis confirms that Acts 19:1-7 reaffirms that the mission of the church is not solely an act of human planning but a collaborative work with the Holy Spirit. True discipleship is marked not only by instruction but by encounter, transformation, and the ongoing empowerment of the Spirit. When the church embraces

this model, it moves beyond institutional maintenance to become a dynamic, Spirit-led movement capable of renewing individuals and communities through the power of the gospel.

Chapter three, Historical Foundations, shares elements of the life of Susanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley, The Methodist movement's founder. It further details how the system of discipleship that Susanna designed and implemented for her children's growth subsequently impacted the Wesleyan tradition's concept of discipleship--the responsibility of walking the disciple process with love, tenderness, patience and empathy makes a profound difference.

Chapter four, Theological Foundations, posits that the Wesleyan framework, with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification, offers a rich tapestry for understanding the complex dynamics of spiritual transformation. Furthermore, incorporating neuroscientific insights can provide a unique perspective on how spiritual transformation can be understood and facilitated in contemporary contexts. Finally, churches must consider their context and heritage as they step into the future.

Chapter five, Interdisciplinary Foundations, delves into the dialogue between the theology of sanctification, spiritual formation, and cognitive science, specifically, neuroplasticity, as it applies to Wesleyan tradition and ethos. Neuroplasticity and mindfulness demonstrate humanity's inherent capacity to reorganize and neurologically synchronize itself, promoting well-being and personal transformation. This chapter explains in detail why neuroplasticity and mindfulness are valuable tools within gnosis; however, it is the breath of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to reach their full potential in Christ. Sanctification, guided by epignosis, not only transforms individuals

but also equips them to impact their contexts with God’s perfect love and redeeming grace.

The document concludes with a chapter on implementation of the project and project data analysis. Participants were invited to conduct an introspective inventory of their spiritual life and formation, providing an opportunity for them to reflect upon their faith journey. They engaged deeply with specialized literature which addressed the relationship between spiritual formation, neuroplasticity, and the believer's sanctification. They then discerned how these disciplines could inform and enrich an understanding of sanctifying grace and how to respond to life events as agents of transformation. The outcomes of this research indicate a profound transformation on three tiers: personal, ministerial, and in the generative transmission of the spiritual legacy. By achieving these outcomes, believers began to acknowledge themselves as active agents in their own spiritual development. The findings also reveal critical areas for growth and opportunities for deeper engagement, particularly in education in Wesleyan theology and neuroplasticity, which will impact future implementations.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

I was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. On my beautiful and charming island, we have forests, phosphorescent lagoons, buildings from the time of the Conquistadores, and an exquisite climate. Relocating to New York State required me to make many changes to adapt to my current context. These experiences have challenged me to mature and constantly evolve to know myself better. I have now lived in upstate New York for more years than I have lived consecutively and continuously in my homeland. Over time, I have developed a unique attitude and approach to learning, appreciating the diversity of both places, with curiosity and creativity. This approach has allowed the contexts in which I have inserted myself to inform and transform me.

Most recently, I served as District Superintendent for the Upper New York Conference of the United Methodist Church to the Niagara Frontier[1] (NFD) and Cornerstone Districts.[2] My immediate geographic context for the NFD is the northwest corner of upstate New York and includes the Seneca Native American Nation, five New

[1] "Niagara Frontier District," United Methodists of Upper New York, last accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.unyumc.org/district/niagara-frontier.

[2] "Cornerstone District," United Methodists of Upper New York, last accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.unyumc.org/district/cornerstone.

York State counties, six cities, and New York State's second most populous metropolitan area, the city of Buffalo. The Cornerstone District is surrounded by the rolling hills, woodlands, lakes, rivers, and streams of the region. The Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua Lake, the Allegheny Reservoir and Lake Erie are all within this district. The geographic diversity of both these districts is remarkable. Every season of the year, the entire region attracts crowds from all over the world. Its iconic events and products delight tourists. The mighty Niagara Falls, one of the wonders of creation, is located near Buffalo.

Our conference is divided into regions, and I was part of the Great Lakes Region District Superintendent team, which includes the Niagara Frontier, Genesee Valley, Crossroads, and Finger Lakes Districts. Geographically we covered the entire colorful region of Midwest, North Central, and Western New York State. My study context also includes all the Hispanic-Latino ministries of the annual conference.

Historical Descriptions

The Upper New York Annual Conference[3] was established in 2010 by combining four annual conferences: Western New York, the North Central New York Conference and the New York State portions of the Troy Conference and Wyoming Conferences. With more than 134,000 members, the New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church comprises 865 local churches and 91 active new faith communities in

[3] "Chronology of Events in Upper New York Conference," United Methodists of Upper New York https://www.unyumc.org/images/uploads/Chronology_UNY_-_illustrated.pdf, last accessed February 10, 2025

12 districts, covering 48,000 square miles in 49 of the 62 counties of The United Methodist Church.[4]

Significant Events

The western region of our state, which includes the districts I served, is distinguished for being among the most racially segregated areas on both the national and state levels. According to Stephon Johnson,[5] writing for the *Amsterdam News*, shared that New York has for years been the most segregated state in the United States. The *Record News*, a website that published New York State University articles, confirms and supports Johnson's conclusion. The *Record's* journalist closed the loop by identifying the city of Buffalo as "one of the most segregating cities in America."[6] Only two local churches are African American, and both are located in the NFD.

The largest concentration of racial and ethnic minorities outside the New York City region are identified in the region referred to as the Great Lakes Region of our conference. For the past few decades, the conference has attempted to work with minorities' challenges such as poverty, education, health care, and adequate housing. Sadly, there has been little progress.

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[4] "About Us," United Methodists of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/about/about-us, last accessed February 10, 2025.

[5] Stephen Johnson, "Separate/Together Report: New York State most Segregated in U.S. for Black Students," *The Amsterdam News* (New York), June 17, 2021, https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2021/06/17/separatetogether-report-new-york-state-most-segreg/.

[6] Elijah Robinson, "How Buffalo Became one of the most Racially Segregated Cities in America, *Buffalo State Record* (Buffalo), October 21, 2021, https://buffstaterecord.com/16733/news/how-buffalo-became-one-of-the-most-racially-segregated-cities-in-america/.

The conference has been significantly affected by a debate over human sexuality, which has engaged the worldwide United Methodist Church for more than fifty years. The General Conference (GC), which legislates changes in the UMC, meets every four years to review the church's mission and message and articulates the essential legislation to carry out its ministry. For the first time in UMC history, the GC was postponed twice, in 2020 and 2022. In May 2024, the GC voted by overwhelming majorities to remove from the United Methodist Book of Discipline discriminatory language and bans to ministry by, with, and for "self-avowed practicing" gay and lesbian people.[7] Because of the human sexuality debate, The UMC, our conference, and the districts I oversaw, have experienced an exodus of various congregations using a disaffiliation method to amicably separate from the denomination.

In April 2020, New York State became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting all lifestyles, economies, and systems. According to a recent article in the Buffalo News[8] more than 375,000 Western New Yorkers had contracted Covid-19 between March 2020 and September 2022, and 4,172 have died from it. The impact on

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[7] United Methodist Church, "General Conference Legislative Recap," chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2024/05/04/14/25/general-cnference-legislative-recap-final.pdf.

[8] "COVID-19 in Western New York: the Latest Statistics," *Buffalo News* (Buffalo), https://buffalonews.com/news/local/covid-19-in-western-new-york-the-latest-statistics/article_261f0820-dcb5-11ea-9ade-d3e35b30860b.html, December 1, 2022.

people of color,[9] and poorer citizens, has been disproportionately higher than on white people.[10]

One of the cruelest and most violent acts in the modern history of the state of New York took place on May 14, 2022,[11] when a mass shooting occurred in Buffalo, at a Tops Friendly Markets supermarket in Buffalo's East Side neighborhood. Ten people, all of whom were Black, were murdered and three were injured. Today we continue to deal with the symptoms and consequences of the prolonged trauma of systematic racism directed at minorities.

Important Figures

Bishop Violet L. Fisher served as Bishop of the Western and North Central New York Annual Conference from 2000 to 2008. One of her outstanding contributions was to begin to facilitate the consolidation of the four annual conferences that gave life to what is now called the UNYAC. In 2008, Bishop Marcus Matthews was assigned to the New York West Area and in 2010, he became the resident bishop of the Upper New York Area Conference. Bishop Matthews consolidated the work that Bishop Violet began, along with his new annual conference and cabinet, to configure the new districts.

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[9] "Differential Impacts of COVID-19 in New York State: Understanding and Eliminating Minority Health Disparities in a 21st-century Pandemic," *University at Albany State of New York*, https://www.albany.edu/communicationsmarketing/covid-19-documents/Racial%20Disparities%20in%20COVID-19%20Bonus%20Briefing%20Paper%5B2%5D.pdf, 1.

[10] "Monitoring the Key Aspects of the Epidemic," COVID-19 Data in New York: OVERVIEW, https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/covid-19-data-new-york.

[11] Artemis Moshtaghian, Emma Tucker, Shimon Prokupecz and Samantha Beech, "10 people killed in a racially motivated mass shooting at a Buffalo supermarket, police say. The 18-year-old suspect is in custody," CNN, https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/14/us/buffalo-ny-supermarket-multiple-shooting/index.html.

Bishop Mark J. Webb was installed as Bishop for the Upper New York Conference on September 1, 2012, and retired on December 31, 2022. Bishop Héctor A. Burgos Núñez, the first Hispanic-Latino bishop in the Northeastern Jurisdiction and the first Puerto Rican bishop in The United Methodist Church, was assigned to serve as the Episcopal leader of the Upper New York Area effective Jan. 1, 2023. Both Bishops Webb and Burgos Núñez have carried out the task of focusing and empowering the conference to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world.

Rev. Bill Gottschalk-Fielding has been the director of Connectional Ministries and Assistant to the Bishop from July 1, 2010, to the present. Rev. Dr. Aaron Bouwens has served as the conference's Director of Vital Congregation since 2012. Dr. Bouwens is the strategist behind nurturing and strengthening pastoral and laity duties for the work of the ministry. Mary Bradley is Office Manager for the Bishop's office, providing high-level administrative support to the Executive Assistant to the Bishop and the Resident Bishop of the conference. She trains, coaches, and mentors all the conference district administrative assistants. Rev. David Masland was responsible for helping to establish the most new faith communities of any conference in our Northeast Jurisdiction.

Geographic Descriptions

The districts are a unique blend of urban, suburban and rural congregations and include some of New York's major cities. The area is home to many of the state's natural wonders: Niagara Falls, two of North America's Great Lakes (Erie and Ontario), and is steeped in the history of Frederick Douglass, the Underground Railroad, and Chautauqua

Institution. Our congregations also welcome those vacationing in this beautiful part of God's creation.[12]

Beautiful structures dating from the 18th and 19th centuries adorn our districts. Sculptures and buildings rich in history are included in our places of worship. Although they are works of art, the architectural designs and goals that spoke to the logistics of that era make them archaic and obsolete buildings in our generation. Eighteenth and 19th-century endowment buildings have become ineffective resource drainers. Rev. George Nicholas, who pastors one of these churches, identified the financial burden of maintaining and upgrading the buildings as a potent obstacle to focusing on inner-city ministry and responding to today's challenges.

Demographic Descriptions

The Niagara Frontier District is comprised of Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Wyoming, and Orleans counties. The Cornerstone District is located in New York's southwest corner. It encompasses all of Chautauqua County, Cattaraugus County, and part of Allegany County.

The churches that I supervised are part of the so-called mainline Protestant churches, where membership has decreased significantly for the past 50 years.[13] In addition to changes in demographics, with people moving out of the Northeastern United States, younger parishioners began to regard the church's messages as irrelevant. Another

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[12] "Conference Districts," United Methodists of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/ about/districts, last accessed February 11, 2025.

[13] "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/ religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/, last accessed February 11, 2025.

factor was the inflexibility of parishioners, and sometimes their pastors, to make necessary adjustments which serve the new generations and their communities. The church is no longer the center of information, nor does it serve as a community meeting place. Our districts have experienced a giant exodus of members over the past decades.

Our missional context has the peculiarity of intertwining rural areas, suburbs, and metropolitan areas. As in other regions of the country, African American, Hispanic Latino, and other ethnic minority communities are visible in metropolitan areas. In rural areas, racial diversity is drastically diminished.[14] The same is true of theological diversity. Urban areas and suburbs tend to have a greater representation of progressive congregations, while rural areas are primarily conservative. Lastly, communities are divided regarding issues of national politics and human sexuality.[15]

The Present Ministry

The information shared here is the product of personal interviews with a variety of sources. These start with pastors, congregations, and community leaders throughout the Western New York region. They also include my professional colleagues, Rev. Dr. Alberto Lanzot and Rev. Dr. John Loeser, as well as District Associates lay members Susan Hardy, Kris Snyder, and Georgia Whitney. I interviewed an average of one

[14] "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew.

[15] Brennan Hallock, "The Divide Between Rural and Urban Christianity," Outlook: News and Inspiration from Middle America, November 7, 2017https://www.outlookmag.org/the-divide-between-rural-and-urban-christianity/, accessed February 13, 2025.

hundred pastors and met with the congregation's leader for the past six years annually.[16] These interviews provided a vast amount of information.

NFD/Cornerstone Ministerial Staff and District Focus

Cultural and social, ethnic, economic, neurodiversity, and educational diversity are some of the characteristics of the context in which I do ministry. Based on these aspects of diversity, I believe that each human has gifts, abilities, talents, and capacities to bless and transform another human being. I consider myself a person who takes high and daring risks when doing ministry. One of the risks I usually take is to be very intentional in giving opportunities and opening the doors to people of ethnicity, race, and culture different from mine. I have learned to take risks without sacrificing the mission of the church to be inclusive or diverse. That is why I hired Lyn Moon to join me as an assistant administrator for the Niagara Frontier District and Cornerstone offices. Ms. Moon is Korean and learned to speak, write, and read English as an adult. She has proven to be an excellent strategist. Ms. Moon moved and performed her tasks with a unique ability to adapt, learn and understand the job as she developed the prescribed skills of her position. Ms. Moon was the missing cog in the wheel that moves and connects the district offices with local churches, ministries, and the conference office.

Our conference's vision states, "We transform the world as we nurture passionate disciples of Jesus Christ that embody and share faith, love, mercy, and justice in their every-day lives. Our discernment, based on this vision, concluded that the driving force

[16] "2023-2024 Church/Charge Conference and Annual Forms," Upper New York Annual Conference, https://uny.umcprofile.org, accessed February 13, 2025.

and agent of execution of the church's mission is found and carried out at the level of the local church. Our emphasis is outlined in our purpose as an annual conference, which is: "Partnering to increase the vitality of existing congregations and create New Faith Communities by discovering, developing and deploying Christ-following transformational leaders." The annual conference gives life to the ministry strategy of the districts I served. I referred to our district as *"Rio de Dios,"* or "River of God," and it was mighty, thanks to the currents and streams that fed and sustained it. These currents were maintained by four district associates (DAs), pastors, and lay people who serve at our altars. Our four DAs who skillfully direct four of the five streams helped to make up the *"Rio de Dios."*

Our district cultures were distinguished by a desire to give direct, personal pastoral care to each pastor and their congregation. Our ministry was designed to discover and develop the pastor and laity's talents, gifts, and abilities. We worked as a team to build Christ Following Transformational Leaders (CFTL). Christ Following Transformational Leaders are disciples of Jesus Christ who lead transformation by:

- Fostering a culture for people to be open and available to the work of the Holy Spirit
- Understanding the gifts and needs of their ministry setting
- Equipping a disciple-making culture
- Discovering, developing, deploying, and leading new and existing leaders
- Inspiring and equipping others for works of evangelism, justice, and mercy
- Building a culture of transformation that will outlast the leader
- Creating, leading, and empowering a system of accountability to the mission

Our goal is to empower these leaders so that, when deployed, they served the context that houses their faith communities with vitality and transforming power.[17]

We did ministry as a team with clergy and laity to create a new culture. The new culture ignored the outdated models imposed, which, for years, made us dependent on direction from general agencies, external programs, and the annual conference. Instead of meeting with clergy once a year, I worked with both laity and clergy, encouraging them to discern their course of action based on an understanding of their individual contexts and perspective.

This new initiative began to bear fruit. We initiated Intentional Disciples Making Programs (IDMP), structured initiatives designed to actively cultivate and develop followers of Jesus Christ by providing opportunities for personal spiritual growth, accountability, and equipping individuals to share their faith with others, often through small group settings and leadership development programs.[18] Churches began to implement Ministry Action Plans (MAP), strategic documents that outlined a church's goals, initiatives, and steps to actively live out its mission by engaging with the community, focusing on discipleship, and addressing specific needs within their congregation.[19] Through conversations about spirituality, training, community, and internal needs, many churches created ministries according to their IDMP and MAP.

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[17] "Our Focus," United Methodist of Upper New York, last accessed February 11, 2025, https://www.unyumc.org/about/our-focus#Christ%20Following%20Transformational%20Leader.

[18] Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church "See All the People," Develop a Discipleship System, last accessed February 11, 2025, https://www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system.

[19] Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church, "Mission, Vision, and Action - Issue #211 (November 14, 2014)," last accessed February 14, 2025, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/mission-vision-and-action-issue-211-november-14-2014.

One-on-One Pastoral Supervisory Conversations

To better support district pastors, the district superintendent's office held annual one-on-ones conversations with each of them. These talks start mid-summer and end in early fall, before the holiday season, and before charge conferences. The one-on-ones had a structure recommended by the cabinet, and each DS was given the flexibility to add questions according to their district's mission and context. In the case of my districts, the conversation was aimed at continuing to carry out ministry which is focused on the mission of the annual conference. The one-on-ones took a holistic approach, emphasizing the pastor's spiritual, family, and personal life. We worked together to discover, develop, and deploy (our "three Ds") how we would work as a team, empowering pastors to exercise their ministries effectively. Effectiveness was translated and evaluated according to the CFTL, IDP, and MAP.

Board of Laity (BOL)

To strengthen our laity, the BOL team trained and empowered their work in a transformative way by engaging and encouraging our Wesleyan ethos. The BOL's mission was to team with the local church's ministry to strengthen and nurture the spiritual life of certified laity and ministry candidates. The BOL facilitated workshops and training experiences (face-to-face and via Zoom) for Certified Lay Ministers (CLM), Certified Lay Servants (CLS), and Lay Speakers (LS) throughout the year. The conversations were structured, directed, oriented, and configured to meet the needs of the laity as they responded to the communities they serve, and in their field of mission.

Charge/Church Conferences (CCC)

Charge/church conferences supported individual church ministries by celebrating each ministry's accomplishments. They then worked to evaluate the church's strategies and propose new ones as needed. This process ensured that the CCC strengthened the bonds of fellowship with the local church by bridging the gap between the church and the district office.

District Committee on Ordained Ministry (DCOM)

Our DCOM was responsible for mentoring and supporting candidates to ministry. DCOM was comprised of an intentionally designed team representing the district's theological, regional, and ethnic diversity, and one that clearly supported its mission. DCOM also understood the need we have for pastors and collaborated with the BOL and the district offices to invite laity and ministers from other denominations to do ministry in our midst. DCOM strived to do this work without significant obstacles, and without sacrificing identity, principles, and mission.

Clergy Gatherings

One of our church's greatest challenges is our inability to take advantage of its ethnic, racial, cultural, theological, and intellectual diversity. To meet that challenge, the districts sponsored a variety of informational events. These programs of fellowship activities allowed us to expose ourselves to different styles of leadership, worship,

preaching, and communication. These meetings were what give shape and life to the currents of the districts.

District Streams

The streams of the NFD and Cornerstone Districts were eleven different groups of elders, local pastors, and lay pastors who were configured by area and pastoral experience. A District Associate led each stream. As a team, we worked on our relationship to transfer our expertise and communal experience to the colleagues we supervised. We held meetings where the culture of the "Three Ls" -- loving, learning, and leading -- and the "Three Ds" serve as foundation and structure, giving life to everything we do. Also, as a team, we agreed that pastoral work was lonely, stressful, and not well understood. Seeking to respond to this reality, we created goals with each meeting and gathering. We made sure that the pastors were taking a day off, that they had separate weekly sabbatical and vacations as needed, and that the stability and care of family were a priority. Our monthly conversations offered coaching, mentoring, advice, and pastoral accompaniment. We facilitated discussions for the development and implementation of ministry strategies and plans.

Ethnic, Cultural, and Racial Diversity

The districts I supervised were rich in ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity. The fact that the City School District of Buffalo records over 80 languages in its system said a

great deal.[20] That diversity was made manifest in our houses of worship. NFD was blessed to serve the African American community, Native Americans, the Korean community, Hispanic/Latinos, Myanmar (Mizo), and immigrants and refugees from Africa and Eastern Europe. The district also included several diaconal ministries, rural areas, and three new faith communities: Empowerment, Jesus Esperanza Viva, and Clarence Center UMC Korean.

The NFD is home to our conference's two African American congregations, Lincoln Memorial and Metropolitan UMC. Both faith communities had vital ministries, unique traditions and histories, and the potential to continue to reach new generations. Both churches became known for their hard work and involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic. They advocated for medical plans and created centers for food banks, vaccination programs, and clinical follow-ups. Both Lincoln Memorial and Metropolitan UMCs were affected firsthand by the May 14th massacre. Families in both ministries and nearby still work to manage the pain and suffering of relatives, friends, and neighbors who were affected by this trauma—and will, for years to come. At the same time, both congregations have remained steadfast in their community work, healing, restoring, giving, and presenting a common front for the good of the gospel and the community. Four Corners UMC (FCUMC) is a Native American faith community. FCUMC worships according to its culture and traditions, spirit, and style, and leads its ministry by reflecting the identity of the Seneca Nation, of which it is a part.

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[20] Mike Desmond, "84 Languages Spoken in Buffalo Public Schools," WBFO Buffalo Toronto Public Media, last accessed February 11, 2025, https://www.wbfo.org/education/2018-04-02/84-languages-spoken-in-buffalo-public-schools.

The ministry of Seneca St. UMC, led by Deacon Dee Finch, was another reflection of our district's multiculturalism. Deacon Dee Finch and her team offered a variety of services, including a hot meal every week, to the Seneca/Babcock neighborhood, which is the poorest white community in Erie County. This church succeeded in creating a unique worship experience which was designed and led by the community's people. The people who have received the food facilitate the preparation, distribution, and handling of the food that they now serve and distribute. That same team prepares and distributes spiritual nourishment through weekly worship.

Buffalo Korean UMC was experiencing difficult times as the population it served had been migrating to other areas of the United States and even returning to its motherland. Nonetheless, the church showed resilience and determination to continue doing ministry in their language, culture, and style. As I supervised this church, it was experiencing a season of renewal under a new appointment that promised to raise the faith community to levels never experienced.

Buffalo's west side, like the rest of the city, has a higher-than-average crime rate[21], and a poverty rate that is among the highest in the city[22]. Jehovah Jireh Community Church (JJCC) is located on Buffalo's west side, a community with the highest incidence of poverty in the city. JJCC loved, served, and walked in the community with the passion that distinguishes the Hispanic-Latino culture. That passion

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[21] "How safe is Buffalo, NY?," U.S. News and World Report – Real Estate, https://realestate.usnews.com/places/new-york/buffalo/crime, last accessed February 11, 2025.

[22] Linda S. Kahn et al, "Living with diabetes on Buffalo, New York's Culturally Diverse West Side," National Library of Medicine, last accessed February 13, 2025. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3918891/#:~:text=The%20West%20Side%20of%20Buffalo,the%20majority%20within%20this%20group.

was palpable and visible in the church's service. Its staff and parishioners worked closely with the local departments of education and health, the mayor's office, and the Erie County Sheriff's office. In addition to its community mission work, this church was known for its service outside of the United States.

The NFD gave birth to a New Faith Community aimed at ministering to the communities of Myanmar (the Mizo community). Today we have a native pastor from this land who knows the language, culture, and traditions and is serving the church full-time. Pastor Lal Fak Mawia, from Myanmar, provides spiritual leadership to both the English and Mizo speaking members of the congregation.

Buffalo, New York is known throughout the county as a sanctuary city that adopts and shelters immigrants from all over the world. Our district is blessed with the ministry of the Central Park United Methodist Church (CPUMC), led by Rev. Brian Rotach and his team. This team does great work through Clara's Closet and services that connect parishioners with various government agencies and entities. The refugee community from different regions of the world, especially from the African continent, has found in CPUMC a house of worship where mercy and empathy are embodied.

Our districts were committed to embracing new people with a variety of diverse needs, and were determined to create and innovate worship opportunities that included everyone. To that end, we sponsored three additional New Faith Communities. Empowerment Ministry UMC is a new online African American ministry. Clarence Center UMC now includes a Korean congregation; Wesley's Place is designed for University at Buffalo students; and Jesús Esperanza Viva is a thriving Hispanic NFC.

The NFD is experiencing a decisive move from diaconal ministries. We have seven diaconal ministers working in both conference ministries and the local church. In addition to the deacons already mentioned, another deacon is a social worker. Others work with a domestic violence agency, our camp and retreat ministries, or serve local churches.

With a few exceptions, the sixty-plus churches in the Cornerstone District of Upper New York are rural, surrounded by the rolling hills, woodlands, lakes, rivers and streams of our region. The Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua Lake, the Seneca Nation, the Allegheny Reservoir and Lake Erie are all within the district. Its rural ministries were known for their determination and intentionality to listen to the community they serve and respond to their needs by creating the right kinds of ministries. These ministries were distinguished by their benevolence, charity, and connection to government agencies that provide food, technology service, respite care, and serve the elderly. This district's people and churches came in all "shapes and sizes" – they had praise bands and pipe organs, Bible studies and food pantries, youth ministries and mission trips. While they are a much more homogeneous population than the Niagara Frontier District, they celebrated their diversity knowing that they were united by their love for Christ. They focused on sharing that love with others – down the street and around the world.[23]

[23] "Cornerstone District," United Methodist of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/district/cornerstone, last accessed February 13, 2025.

Appointments

Clergy appointments were made by the cabinet table following intensive discernment. The process was sustained and nurtured by deep and intensive prayer, reflection, and meditation periods. This also included conversations with regional teams, which sought to discern, until discovering, the possible alternatives that matched the contextual needs or advantages of each ministry.[24]

Clergy and Local Church Concerns

As stated earlier, our districts were in one of the most ethnically and racially diverse regions of our state and nation. Therefore, we chose to do several things differently. The primary action was separate the problem of racism, displacement, and discrimination that the African American community has lived and experienced for centuries from those battles that other minorities and ethnic groups live and experience. As a cabinet, we moved away from emotional and idealistic speeches regarding racism. We started aggressively attacking the absence and shortage of African American ministers in our conference without sacrificing our mission. In the past few years, we have recruited new African American ministers and invited lay people to serve as lay pastors. Today, working with the conference, the African American ministry has greater clarity and structure to meet this group's pastoral, community, and laity needs.

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[24] Bishop Mark J. Webb, "How do clergy appointments get made?" United Methodists of Upper New York, July 19, 2013, https://www.unyumc.org/news/article/how-do-clergy-appointments-get-made, last accessed February 13, 2025.

We also implemented Imagine No Racism (INR) 2.0, a six-session small group study designed to launch the ongoing work of addressing, and ultimately, dismantling racism. INR's goal was for churches and connectional organizations within the Conference to show a "real increase in mission and ministries that impact racial justice in churches and communities."[25] There are an unlimited number of faithful, authentic, and tangible expressions of this goal. Our districts sought to use the curriculum as an informative, educational, and transformational tool to elevate conversations about racism. We then measured our participants' progress. We believed that dismantling racism is a moral, ethical, and human calling.[26]

Conclusion

Our mission as an annual conference was clear and straightforward: Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Our goal as a conference was to empower the pastors and laity for the church's mission. The goals we sought to achieve were real: 900 Christ-follower transformational leaders. The purpose of the UNY AC was to equip leaders and congregations for transformational ministry. Our primary task was to increase the leadership capacity of clergy and congregational leaders for transformational ministry.

In each region of our conference, District Superintendents work in a collaborative team as chief missional strategists to fulfill our primary task and missional objectives by

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[25] Stephen J. Hustedt, "Bishop's Taskforce is Called to Eliminate Racism," United Methodists of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/news/article/bishops-taskforce-is-called-to-eliminate-racism, last accessed February 11, 2025.

[26] "Imagine No Racism," United Methodist of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/ministries/corr/inr, last accessed February 13, 2025.

providing spiritual leadership; creating missional clarity and alignment within the region/districts; developing and resourcing the regional operational and area teams; and overseeing the ministry of clergy and local churches. Despite the diversity of the region, the situations each area faces were similar: the lack of relevance of the message that the church proclaims, and the church's inability to listen to the needs of the community that houses them. Therefore, the church programs were not speaking to the community's needs. This showed a poor understanding of their mission and the absence of strategies for the work.

The analysis helped me to rediscover the weaknesses and disadvantages, strengths and advantages of the context that I had been called to serve. The evangelical-religious culture (little spirituality, tradition without conviction), and the old buildings are weaknesses and disadvantages. The transience of the communities at the same time was projected as an advantage and strength. For opportunities like these, the book *Tempered Resilience* challenged the leadership of the institution to do transcendental things: "The default behavior of most organizational leaders is to solve problems for our organizations rather than change our organizations for meeting the needs of the world."[27] The evangelical-religious culture is synonymous with a life in Christ by tradition without conviction. Our Methodist movement sometimes manifests as a sect that has never known God's transforming power. One of the founders and promoters of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, said it best:

> I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am worried they should only exist as a

[27] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience* (Tempered Resilience Set) (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition, 2020), 19.

> dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast to both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out (Wesley, 1831, p.315).

This condition was a double-edged reality. Focusing on such a reality invited either closing churches or addressing the challenge of reinvention to find oneself again. I firmly believed in the transforming power of the message and counsel of the gospel of God revealed in Christ Jesus. I was firm in my conviction that the gospel message is the only solution for the transformation and reconciliation of the world (2 Corinthians 5:19). The gospel message's effectiveness was intertwined and manifested through a church that lived its faith with evidence of that transformative power.

I saw as an advantage in that we already have properties. Also, a congregation, even though it is likely aging and may be ineffective, provides several opportunities. First, one could try to lead the church community to a renewal of their faith and passion that gave them life. Second, churches' assets—both financial and otherwise—could bring life to new expressions of the gospel that responded to the new communities populating the region.

Longstanding properties are currently an unsustainable financial burden. Despite their unsustainability, they are offering an opportunity for restructured reuse. Our facilities could give life to kindergartens, non-profit organizations, and spaces for community health, nutrition, and exercise programs.

Demographic changes reconfigured the region into communities systematically inhabited by the African American community, immigrants, and refugees from the developing world. Communities that Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups previously populated could be transitory communities for minorities. Low-income people of color who have

settled in certain sections of our cities offered a mission field in our backyard. Under other circumstances, we, the church, would have to send missionaries to their native countries to reach them with the gospel message.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a fatal blow on all levels of society. The pandemic challenged the church to rediscover and rethink their ways of doing ministry and their programs' effectiveness. One of the things that the pandemic invited us to reflect on from different perspectives is that we are beings created to live in community and that the emotional and spiritual life is essential to our survival. It is impossible to have spiritual maturity if we are emotionally immature [28]. Sadly, we have sacrificed our spiritual leaders without considering their emotional and mental needs. Due to the inclination to love and serve, care and protect, pastors, who are natural empaths, were deeply affected by the traumas and problems of the people they cared for. We cared for them but sometimes neglected caring for ourselves. In her book *From Burn Out to Beloved*, author Bethany Dearborn Hiser calls this phenomenon "secondary trauma." [29]

> Secondary trauma—the emotional and physiological toll of hearing about another person's first-hand experience of trauma—is a well-documented phenomenon that can affect anyone. It's compounded when we carry our own personal trauma as well. Understanding its effect can increase our compassion for ourselves, our awareness of how we are being impacted, and our motivation to discover sustainable practices.

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[28] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017) https://read.amazon.com/kp/kshare?asin=B00ZRPBCRI&id=6huzis7w6zcepkhe36anrlp2iy&reshareId=WJJ69QDK8MEA14V28MXG&reshareChannel=system, 60.

[29] Bethany Dearborn Hiser, *From Burned Out to Beloved* (Lisle: InterVarsity Press, Kindle Edition), 18.

The invitation was for us to raise to higher levels of effectiveness the strategies that Covid 19 forced us to create to serve the community and do ministry. The Covid 19 era challenged us to provide care for our clergies and help them to manage symptoms of secondary trauma.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

As a district superintendent of the UNYACUMC from 2018 until 2024, I saw firsthand the challenges our conference faced in losing members. They have struggled to confront and overcome a myriad of challenges which stem from evolving sociocultural shifts that have occurred for many years, yet their membership continued to decrease. Through prayer and conversations with pastors and leaders, reflection, and deep discernment, the conference discovered certain characteristics common to most of its ministries.

The main challenge for the multiplication and healthy growth of the churches I oversaw was spiritual. It seemed we did ministry that was alienated, estranged, and divorced from the Holy Spirit. What had happened to The United Methodist Church once known as "the people of the burning heart" – hearts that were set on fire and consumed with Jesus?

The second challenge was born from, and fed on, the first. Our conference neglected to preach the manifold grace of God as a progressive/ascending, circular, non-linear rigid revelation: sanctifying theology. The gospel message and the intimate relationship that Jesus came to rebuild between God and humans had not been inherited or transferred generationally. This revelation was an invitation that had to be accepted

and received individually and personally through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. How could we otherwise hope to make new disciples and continue to be instruments of transformation without bringing new people to God? How could we do this without the gospel and without conviction in response to the message of salvation?

Lastly, as a product and result of doing ministry this way, our conference found that between 90 and 95 percent of the churches I oversaw were unaware of the need for an Intentional Discipleship Plan (IDP) and a Ministry Action Plan (MAP). The question we asked was: why are we doing church and ministering without a process for making disciples and without a MAP? The answers to these questions could change the direction of our conference in the years ahead.

I proposed a project aimed at responding to the need for a generic model, or prototype, for an IDP and MAP. In order for this to happen, the church that created these plans must remain in continuous conversation concerning its contextual reality. Specifically, they must first reflect and respond to what we learned from the COVID 19 pandemic, which forced us to realize that our methods for doing ministry were not effective. We needed to rewrite the playbook.

In addition to the fallout from the COVID 19 pandemic, our world was changing faster than ever, which meant we must update our IDP and MAP frequently. Five- and ten-year plans were a thing of the past. Based on what we learned from COVID, we needed to revise these documents on a short-, mid-, and long-term basis. For example, if a community was changing rapidly, I proposed that ministers review their plans monthly. Further, IDPs and MAPs must be created and reviewed in a way that seeks to ensure that their tools function convergently, coherently, and interdependently. Because they were

tools, they must be adjusted, calibrated, updated, and if necessary, replaced. These tools must continue to collaborate for the effectiveness, excellence, and productivity of the strategy developed in IDPs and MAPs.

To produce the multiplication and growth of faith communities, MAPs and IDPs were essential tools. A third tool was also critical: the MissionInsite (MIS) demographic report. This web-based provider for local church use provides demographic data that is updated on a regular basis and the reports are user friendly to the novice or experienced demographer. MAPs, IDPs and (MIS) needed to be synchronized, calibrated, and applied with discipline. Combining, assembling, and synchronizing these three tools provided what I called a "close encounter approach" between the local church and its context. This approach focused less on the rules and dogma of religion and a great deal more on building relationships. From these relationships the local church's leadership could better learn from its context, could apply its passion, and discern where God is already at work in the community. Listening to the voice of God through the context would challenge the local church to prepare disciples—the discipleship process--to respond to these needs. This is the mission of the church.

My thesis questions were:

1. Why are we doing ministry that is alienated, estranged, and divorced from the Holy Spirit?
2. Why are we "doing church" – simply practicing religion rather than treating it as a living organism – and sharing the gospel without an IDP and a MAP?

3. How do we hope to make new disciples and continue to be instruments of transformation without bringing new people to God through the gospel out of conviction in response to the message of salvation?

My thesis sought to confirm that churches which are motivated and focused, and concentrated on and informed by an IDP, MAP, and MIS, could result in a ministry which was distanced from the attraction ministry models. This model would successfully provide awakening, forming, framing, and modeling to those who are lost, disengaged, or unchurched to come to Jesus, accept the gospel, and reconnect with the church. My research subjects were the teams of pastors I worked with; my laboratory was my districts. These pastors were at different stages of their personal and ministry faith journey and could support the thesis of my project.

An exegesis of Acts 19:1-7 provided the foundation and biblical support for my project. These verses were a pericope taken from the section that Charles Swindoll, in his commentary, *Insight on Acts*, calls "the expansion of the Church" (Acts 12:1 to 20:2). A second passage from Acts—12:24-25 and 13:1-3—was also relevant. In this passage Paul, Barnabas, and the community of believers in Antioch represented a biblical model of an apostolic-missionary community of faith that was worthy of emulation. This type of culture was the product of an intentionally designed discipleship process. The Antioch church ministered and lived subject to the voice and direction of the Holy Spirit.

A Model for the Intentional Discipleship Process

The discipleship process that I propose is made up of four interconnected pillars that work to serve each other in an indivisible way.

Awakening

This refers to a complete sensory experience. God's grace is manifold with God's wisdom. Because Christ paid the ultimate price for us, God will use whatever is necessary to reach our hearts and reconnect—hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting. Once we have this sensory experience, we can begin to pay attention to the voice of God.

Forming

This refers to spiritual formation, which begins as soon as we awaken. We are sensitized to the voice and movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This step avoids a focus on dogma and rules. Spiritual formation is defined by the disciple as s/he develops a unique plan for her/his own life.

Training / Learning Experiences

We are trained to become knowledgeable about biblical truths. Again, this is more complex and more subtle than simple rule-following. Each individual must discover, develop, and use the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit.

Modeling (Missional-Evangelist)

Modeling impels us to bear witness to the transforming power of God's love first-hand and replaces the term, evangelizing. Modeling reflects our spiritual growth. We model what God has done for us. We are patient with others because God is patient with

us. We invest in others because God has invested in us. Those around us are attracted to us, and from that attraction we begin to build relationships with them.

Discipleship Model Synergism

These pillars work synergistically, awakening a spiritual hunger and thirst, a passion to listen and know God in depth, being prepared to receive the message of salvation and, finally, to proclaim it. In a circular, ascending, progressive, and non-linear way, the Holy Spirit seeks to form receptivity in disciples so that they receive his grace and develop the impetus to act. This process requires that we collaborate with God so that transformation can take place.

The Holy Spirit's goal is to turn us into a temple, living stones to be loved and nurtured, believers who come to Jesus and place their lives upon His foundation. Disciples become worshipers in spirit and truth through God's manifold grace. The understanding of God's purpose is not hidden from those who receive it. God's purpose empowers recipient-disciples consciously and intentionally, and they are motivated and inspired to be teachable for the work of the ministry. In this way, the receiving disciples can model the fruit of the Holy Spirit as a transforming agent.

Relevance of Acts 19:1-7

In its literary and historical context, Acts 19:1-7 confirms that the whole counsel of the gospel message is the revelation of God's manifold grace and wisdom in Christ Jesus. This is a progressive/ascending revelation. In *Insight on Luke*, Charles Swindoll says, "There is no such thing as being partially pregnant; you either carry a new life inside or you don't." Swindoll adds that in Acts 19, "Dr. Luke, a physician by training,

gives us part of his research on the power and manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the early church." Luke shares with Theophilus the importance of certifying that everyone who has received and welcomed the message of God's grace as a receiver-disciple receives the regenerating-transforming activity of the Holy Spirit. Disciples are not forced to do God's work. Once we are awakened, formed, and taught, we have the capacity to model and spread the good news.

In these verses, Luke also invites us to contemplate the diversity of methods, forms, and styles created by the Holy Spirit to announce the gospel. When we look at the ministry of Priscilla and Aquilas, Paul and Barnabas, Apollo, and the disciples in Ephesus, we see that discipleship is not about following rules. The manifold grace of God operates in a progressive and ascending manner, taking them through transitions and into to deeper levels of understanding in Christ.

In Acts 19:1-7, Luke also places the apostle Paul in a position never shared in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul, who was known to avoid entering fields planted by others (2 Cor. 10:16), is seen here in the region of Ephesus, "a region which God had closed off from him on his first attempt, then briefly visited" (Acts 18). Now, for the third time he arrives with the intention of being invested in the work according to the time proposed and outlined by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 19:1-7, we see that in God's time—Kairos—Paul appears to be following in the footsteps of Apollo or other proclaimers of John the Baptist's message.

Exegesis

Introduction

> 19 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and
> came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you
> receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have
> not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 Then he said, "Into what, then, were
> you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." 4 Paul said, "John baptized
> with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to
> come after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the
> name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit
> came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied, 7 altogether there
> were about twelve of them. (NSRVUE)

The book of Acts presents a dynamic model of mission, in which the guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential for the expansion of the gospel in a creative and innovative manner. The passage of Acts 19:1-7 serves as a biblical foundation for analyzing the impact of the gospel in spiritually resistant contexts and the progressive nature of discipleship.

Paul and his team arrive in Ephesus, a city dominated by the religious influence of the Temple of Diana (Artemis), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.[1] In this hostile environment, Paul encounters a group of disciples whose understanding of the gospel is still incomplete.

This detail underscores the importance of a discipleship that not only provides doctrinal instruction but also leads believers into a deeper experience with the Holy Spirit. This passage reveals that Christian formation is a continuous process, where the proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied by the believer's spiritual

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[1] K. O. Gangel. *Acts* (Brentwood: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 320.

transformation. In this sense, Acts 19:1-7 not only describes a historical event but also offers a theological model for discipleship and the expansion of the church in challenging contexts.

During his first missionary journey to the region of Galatia, Paul adopted a methodical, pragmatic, and strategic approach, seizing circumstantial opportunities to advance his evangelistic work. However, as Peyton Jones argues in his book *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches*,[2] since the early days of the church, there has been a tendency to systematize the mission, structuring it in a controlled and standardized manner, similar to the way religious leaders of that time, including Paul himself, operated. Jones suggests that when Paul attempted to apply the same methodology during his second missionary journey, he encountered a different reality: "The Holy Spirit forbade him from speaking the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). When he attempted to enter Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:7), leading to great uncertainty. However, he eventually received divine revelation in the form of a vision, in which a Macedonian man pleaded for help. This vision redefined his course and demonstrated that missionary work was not solely dependent on strategic planning but required total surrender to the guidance and sanctifying transformation of the Holy Spirit.

This lesson is key to understanding the dynamics of discipleship and mission in the church. Within the Wesleyan ethos and tradition, the Christian life is not merely an intellectual or strategic progression but rather a spiritual transformation in which

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[2] Peyton Jones. *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), https://a.co/4dKXlNJ, 212.

dependence on the Holy Spirit is essential. This perspective aligns with the hypothesis of this project, which asserts that faith communities that intentionally cultivate a deep search and dialogue with the Holy Spirit and their context develop a spiritual and cultural sensitivity that enables them to design and implement a structured and transformative discipleship. This model of discipleship, focused on spiritual formation, progressive sanctification, and the renewal of mindset and behavior, fosters greater participation, community cohesion, and active commitment within ecclesial life.

This dynamic transformation is evident in Acts 19:1-7, where we observe that Paul was not the same man during his second missionary journey as he was in the first. His discipleship was not a static event but rather a progressive trajectory in grace and sanctification. His experience reflects what John Wesley described as the continuous work of grace, leading to a deeper relationship with God and a more refined discernment of His direction.[3] In this passage, Luke shows that the spiritual formation of the disciples in Ephesus was also incomplete, but through Paul's discipleship and the work of the Holy Spirit, they experienced a similar transformation. This reinforces the central premise of this study: discipleship not only informs but transforms, guiding believers toward greater spiritual maturity and active participation in the faith community.

Affirming the Gospel's Message

From this perspective, Acts 19:1-7 affirms that the message of the gospel is the progressive and ascending revelation of God's manifold grace and wisdom in Christ

[3] "Foundations of our Faith," General Board of Discipleship Ministries, last accessed February 12, 2025, https://www.resourceumc.org/es/content/bases-de-nuestra-fe?utm_source=chatgpt.com..

Jesus. In *Insight on Acts*, Rev. Dr. Charles Swindoll highlights the integral nature of spiritual transformation, stating: “There is no such thing as being partially pregnant; either you carry new life within you, or you don’t.” Swindoll adds that in Acts 19, Luke, a physician by profession, presents part of his research on the power and manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the early Church. Luke conveys to Theophilus the importance of verifying that everyone who has received and embraced the message of God's grace as a disciple also experiences the regenerative and transformative activity of the Holy Spirit.[4] Disciples are not forced to do God's work; rather, once they are awakened, formed, and taught, they gain the capacity to authentically model and spread the good news as a fruit of their sanctification (*Romans 6:22*).

In Acts 19:1-7, Luke—whom tradition attributes as the author of Acts—invites us to reflect on the diversity of methods, forms, and styles employed by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel. When examining the ministries of Priscilla and Aquila, Paul and Barnabas, Apollos, and the disciples in Ephesus, we see that discipleship is not about following rigid rules or a uniform model of evangelization, but rather an active collaboration with the Holy Spirit that responds to contextual realities. This diversity is essential. J. R. W. Stott argues that the book of Acts serves as a testimony of how an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit preserves the church from systematizing and

[4] Charles R. Swindoll, “The Expansion of the Church: the Full Gospel,” *Insights on Acts* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com /lib/dtl/detail.action?, last accessed February 12, 2025.

universalizing[5] its missional life. Similarly, Wesley emphasized that discipleship is a call to a life of constant growth in personal and social holiness.[6]

In Acts 19:1-7, Luke also places Paul in a unique position within the narrative of the book. Paul, who was known for avoiding ministry in territories already evangelized by others (*2 Corinthians 10:16*), is now seen in Ephesus, where the gospel had already been preached.[7] However, now, for the third time, he arrives with the intention of establishing himself in the work, yet not according to his own timing, but in alignment with divine *kairos*.[8] At this moment, Paul appears to be following in the footsteps of Apollos and other proclaimers of John the Baptist's message, demonstrating that God's mission unfolds progressively and on multiple levels.

This process of transformation is precisely what we find in Acts 19:1-7. Upon arriving in Ephesus, Paul encounters a group of disciples who had been baptized by John the Baptist but had not yet received the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Rather than imposing a rigid evangelistic framework upon these disciples, Paul follows the Holy Spirit's direction, discerning where these disciples are in their spiritual journey and guiding them toward a more complete experience of God's grace.

The church, following this model, cannot depend solely on pre-established methodologies or organizational structures; rather, it must cultivate a deep sensitivity to

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[5] J. R. W. Stott. *The Message of Acts: the Spirit, the Church and the World* (Lisle: IVP Academic, 2020), p. 305.

[6] "Metodismo y Santidad Social," *El Evangelista Mexicana*, last accessed February 12, 2025, https://elevangelistamexicano.org/2016/10/31/metodismo-y-santidad-social/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[7] A. A. Trites, William J. Larkin, "The Gospel of Luke and Acts," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 558.

[8] Gerhard Friedrich, ed., Gerhard Kittel, ed. "Glachau (Saxony)," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 455-462.

the voice of the Holy Spirit in order to actively collaborate with His redemptive work and listen to its context.

The exegetical analysis of Acts 19:1-7 allows a deeper delving into these principles, exploring how the work of the Holy Spirit not only empowers but guides believers on a path of maturity and renewal. Recognizing that mission is not merely a human exercise in planning but an act of collaboration with the Holy Spirit, the church can reclaim its identity as a living organism, shaped and led by the grace of God.

The author of the book of Acts of the Apostles, traditionally attributed to Luke, presents throughout his work various ministerial strategies that laid the foundations and facilitated the initial expansion of the church. Acts 19:1-7 is no exception, as it confirms that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the present life of the believing community. The same works that took place in the early days of the church continue to manifest when a community is willing to collaborate in God's redemptive mission.

Luke reports that this is the third time Paul arrives in Ephesus. His first attempt to minister in this region was prevented by the Holy Spirit, as mentioned in Acts 16:6-8:

> "They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they came opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."

This passage illustrates Paul's first attempt to enter Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit closed that door. This pattern of divine restriction is not uncommon in Acts, as it reflects a key principle: God's redemptive plans cannot be thwarted, but they are carried out according

to His perfect timing (*kairos*). In this sense, there is a parallel with Gamaliel's teaching in Acts 5:38-39, where he warns that if a work is from God, it cannot be stopped.

The initial prohibition of the Holy Spirit preventing Paul from preaching in Asia contrasts with the later authorization that allowed him to establish himself in Ephesus. Foundry Publishing's commentary, *Acts: A Commentary on the Wesleyan Tradition,* notes that Apollos' time in Ephesus coincided with Paul's travels to Jerusalem and Antioch (18:22-23). Luke connects the next episode with Apollos' absence from Ephesus and his ministry in Corinth (18:27—19:1a). Paul's journey through the interior of Asia Minor (19:1a; 18:23) mirrors his previous one (16:6), except for the implication that this time, God allows him to proceed to Ephesus (see 16:6; 18:21). In other words, although Paul was initially prevented from entering Ephesus, God's timing eventually led him there with a specific mission.[9]

Paul's second visit to Ephesus was not the result of a direct revelation but was part of his return route to his ministerial headquarters. In his third visit, Luke resumes Paul's itinerary with a note stating that the apostle takes a higher-elevation, mountainous route west to Ephesus. This was more direct than the usual trade route through the Lycus and Meander valleys. Ephesus, recognized as the main commercial center of Asia, is where Paul's missionary presence is finally established in Acts 19:1-7.[10] It is here that Paul encounters disciples who had not yet received the Holy Spirit. This event is

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[9] Richard P. Thompson, "Acts: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition," in *New Beacon Bible Commentaries* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2015), ProQuest Ebook Central, last accessed February 13, 2025, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=4743689.

[10] W. J. Larkin Jr., "Acts," *Logos Bible Study* Electronic Edition, Vol. 5, Ac 18:23–19:7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic,1995), https://www.logos.com/product/161077/acts39.1.6.

significant because it highlights the essential role of the Holy Spirit in Christian discipleship.

The *New Interpreter's Bible* Volume X commentary points out that Paul's shift toward Europe begins with a summary of his journeys. The Holy Spirit is the true protagonist in the church's mission, sometimes guiding through divine speech and other times through visions. In this case, the Holy Spirit directs Paul by closing doors in Asia rather than opening them. This assertion reinforces the idea that missionary work does not depend solely on human planning but on the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit.[11]

Luke repeatedly uses the verbs "forbid" or "prevent" in Acts (8:36; 10:47; 11:17), underscoring that God not only opens doors but also closes paths when the mission is not yet aligned with His redemptive purpose. In this case, Paul initially planned to preach in Asia with the help of Silas and Timothy (Acts 15:36), but the Holy Spirit redirected him toward Macedonia before allowing him to establish himself in Ephesus. This pattern of restriction followed by later authorization resembles Peter's mission to Cornelius in Acts 10-11, where initial resistance to including the Gentiles in the faith community was challenged and overturned by divine revelation. Both Peter and Paul experienced moments in which their understanding of God's mission was expanded through the Holy Spirit's intervention.[12]

The passage in Acts 16:6-7, much like the passage that unfolds in Acts 19:1-7, invites us to listen to Paul in conversation with his context and ministerial team. Church planter and missiologist Dr. Peyton Jones, in his book *The Art and Science of Planting*

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[11] Leander Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible* Volume X. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 226-227, 261-263

[12] *The New Interpreter's Bible*.

Churches,[13] sheds light on this discussion. In his first missionary journey to the region of Galatia, Paul followed a structured, pragmatic strategy that adapted to emerging opportunities. However, when he attempted to replicate the same approach in his second journey, he encountered an unexpected barrier: "The Holy Spirit forbade him from speaking the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). Every attempt to reach the people he thought he should reach was frustrated, and when he attempted to enter Bithynia, "The Spirit of Jesus did not allow him" (Acts 16:7).

This series of divine restrictions brought Paul to a point of uncertainty and apparent stagnation until, in a dream, he received the vision of a Macedonian man calling for help. It was then that Paul realized that his mission was not dependent on his own plans or strategies but on the sovereign guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The repetition of references to the Holy Spirit in Acts 19:1-7 underscores a central theological conviction in Luke's narrative: the Holy Spirit not only empowers but also guides and redefines the church's mission. Paul, who initially was unable to enter Ephesus, was ultimately led there by the Holy Spirit at the appointed time to complete the disciples' formation and empower them with the Spirit. This account reinforces the idea that Christian discipleship is not merely a process of doctrinal instruction but a transformative experience in which the Holy Spirit actively works in the lives of believers and in the expansion of the church.

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[13] Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches*, last accessed February 12, 2025, https://a.co/hwOI6AQ.

Acts 19:1c: "…and he arrived at Ephesus…"

Luke's account in the book of Acts indicates that Paul had already visited the region surrounding Ephesus during a previous trip (Acts 18:18-23). However, in the verses under examination (Acts 19:1-7), Luke does not specify whether Paul arrived at the same location he had previously visited or if he established contact with disciples he had already encountered. According to the narrative, this would be his third visit to the region, and his arrival confirmed the spiritual need for the gospel in that area (*Acts* 18:19-21).

This detail is significant because it teaches that identifying needs in a region should not be the sole motivator for proclaiming the gospel. While the presence of spiritual and social needs can help shape ministerial efforts, the narrative of Acts emphasizes that the mission of the church must be guided by the Holy Spirit, rather than solely by human strategy. As Peyton Jones argues, Paul's true journey was not just to Macedonia but toward a deeper relationship of dependence and sensitivity to divine direction. His experience demonstrates that ministerial formation is not merely the accumulation of strategies or methodologies but a process of spiritual transformation in which the Holy Spirit shapes the leader to be more receptive to His guidance. Paul was not the same man on his second missionary journey as he was on his first; he had been humbled, had learned from his failures, and had developed a more submissive disposition toward God's will.[14]

Despite the positive reception Paul had previously experienced in Ephesus, he did not remain there for long because he discerned that it was not yet God's appointed time

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[14] Peyton Jones, *Plantology*.

for him to minister on a larger scale (Acts 18:20). The Holy Spirit, in His omniscience, was aware of the needs of the region, but He also had a specific process of preparation—both in Paul and in the people of Ephesus. We do not know exactly what God needed to develop in Paul's heart or how He was preparing the people to receive the message. However, we do know that fruitful and sustainable ministry is only possible when it is carried out in God's *Kairos*, not in human *Chronos*.[15]

The phrase "he arrived at Ephesus" implies much more than simply Paul's physical presence in the region. As Dr. Roger Stronstad argues in *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke: Trajectories from the Old Testament to Luke-Acts*, Luke consistently highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in every missional and evangelistic episode involving Paul and his team (Acts 13:1-12; 15:35-16:10). Considering this observation, it can be inferred that Paul's third missionary journey was coordinated and designed by the Holy Spirit.[16] This pattern suggests that after several previous attempts, God finally opened the door and cleared the path for Paul to enter Ephesus. God does this when spiritual ears are attuned to His voice and hearts are aligned with His will. In this sense, scripture reinforces the principle that mission is not merely the result of human effort but of intimate communion with God. Psalm 33:11 tells us, "The *counsel* of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations." Isaiah 55:8-9 also adds,

> For My *thoughts* are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

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[15] Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, V. 9, 581-593.

[16] Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke: Trajectories from the Old Testament to Luke-Acts*. https://a.co/glAwzRU, last accessed February 12, 2025

Psalm 25:14 continues with this line of thinking: “The *friendship* of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant.”

Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon provides insight into the meaning of thoughts and counsel in these passages. In his analysis, Strong emphasizes that the root of these concepts involves consultation, deliberation, and mutual counsel.[17] This observation reinforces the idea that for ministry to be effective, productive, and spiritually generative, it is necessary not only to be trained and disciplined but to cultivate an intimate relationship with God. Only through this communion can we access the mind of God and align ourselves with His purposes. As the psalmist expresses: "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant" (Psalm 25:14). To walk in God’s ways and thoughts, spiritual formation is essential, as it sensitizes believers to the presence and direction of the Holy Spirit. As stated in Isaiah 50:4-5, this refinement does not occur automatically but is the result of a constant and intentional pursuit of God in the believer’s life.

In Paul’s case, his arrival in Ephesus was not a mere logistical event but the result of prayer, discernment, and obedience to divine direction. This principle remains relevant today: discipleship and mission cannot depend solely on calendars or human strategies but must be rooted in an active dependence on the Holy Spirit.

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[17] J. Strong. *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*. Logos Community Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (New York: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995) https://community.logos.com/discussion/90851/enhanced-strong-concordance.

Acts 19:1c—"and he arrived at Ephesus"

This phrase provides a key to understanding the dynamics of ministry within God's timing. Although Luke does not detail every event that led to Paul's arrival, we can infer that his encounter with the disciples in Ephesus was marked by a recognition of where they stood in their understanding of the progressive revelation of God's grace in Christ. This observation is crucial to the hypothesis of this study, as it reinforces the idea that transformative discipleship is not a static event but a continuous process in which the Holy Spirit directs, equips, and matures both leaders and faith communities.

Acts 19:1: "There he found some disciples"

The narrative of Paul's ministry in Acts 19 follows a similar pattern to his previous experiences in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40) and Corinth (Acts 18:1-17), where the impact of the gospel in Ephesus and its surrounding region is presented through a series of interconnected episodes. David Peterson, in *The Acts of the Apostles,* explains that the diversity and scope of these accounts reflect the magnitude and significance of Paul's encounters with various groups in the region—a city deeply influenced by magic and the worship of the goddess Artemis. Luke, in structuring his account, not only documents the expansion of the gospel but also emphasizes its transformative power in spiritually resistant contexts.[18]

One key element in this narrative is Luke's reference to the disciples whom Paul encounters upon arriving in Ephesus. David Guzik, in his analysis of Acts 19, states that

[18] D. G. Peterson. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 527–528.

this term, however, can be ambiguous, as it seems in Acts, but it does not always exclusively refer to fully integrated believers in the Christian community. In other passages, Luke uses the word "disciple" more broadly to describe individuals who have received some form of spiritual instruction, yet have not necessarily experienced the full work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:13; 18:24-26). In this case, Paul's conversation with these disciples reveals that their understanding of the gospel was incomplete, as they were unaware of the existence and work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2-3).[19]

From a theological and missional perspective, this scene highlights discipleship as a progressive process. Paul does not assume these disciples had fully received the gospel but instead guides them through strategic questions, diagnosing their spiritual understanding and leading them toward a deeper faith experience. Warren W. Wiersbe, in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, asserts that Paul recognized their lack of the Holy Spirit's testimony, indicating they were not truly converted. He argues that many today, like them, engage in religious practices but lack genuine transformation.[20] This aligns with Wesleyan theology of progressive sanctification, where spiritual growth occurs through continuous development in grace and knowledge. True discipleship is not merely doctrinal instruction but a lifelong process of renewal, led by the Holy Spirit's active work in deepening faith and guiding believers toward maturity in Christ.

Theologian David Peterson further emphasizes that the account in Acts 19:1-7 builds upon previous events in Ephesus. Acts 18:19-21 mentions Paul's first visit to the

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[19] "Hechos 19 – Pablo en Éfeso," *Blue Letter Bible*, last accessed February 12, 2025, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/spanish/StudyGuide_Act/Act_19.cfm?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[20] W. W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2004), 480.

synagogue in Ephesus , while Acts 18:24-28 introduces the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos. Luke seems to connect these narratives to show that the establishment of the church in Ephesus did not happen in a single event but was the result of a process in which multiple gospel agents contributed to the formation of the Christian community.

From a missional perspective, the fact that Paul finds disciples who had not yet received the Holy Spirit reinforces the central premise of this project's hypothesis: discipleship is not merely an initial conversion but a continuous transformation that occurs as believers are formed in the fullness of the Holy Spirit's work. Paul's experience in Ephesus suggests that the church's mission is not only about proclaiming the gospel but also about walking alongside believers in a spiritual growth process that deepens their understanding of their identity in Christ.

The analysis of this passage also further explains the transformative discipleship model that shapes this study. Instead of assuming the spiritual maturity of these disciples, Paul discerns their stage of formation and, from there, guides them toward a fuller experience of the gospel. This principle remains relevant today, emphasizing that discipleship models must not only instruct intellectually but also cultivate believers in an intimate relationship with God and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The Concept of "Disciple" in the New Testament

Moreover, the term "disciple," as used by the authors of the New Testament, must be distinguished from its use in Greek philosophical traditions. In Hellenistic philosophy, discipleship was centered on intellectual learning, where education aimed at

the development of knowledge and reason as ultimate ends. However, New Testament discipleship, as modeled by Christ, was not focused on the mere transmission of information but on a relational and transformative commitment to Jesus himself. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* emphasizes that Christ's primary concern was not simply to impart knowledge or deepen pre-existing attitudes, but rather to awaken an unconditional commitment to Him.[21] This distinction is key to interpreting the meaning of "disciple" in Acts 19:1.

Interpretative Debates on Acts 19:1c

The verse Acts 19:1c has been the subject of considerable debate. This passage invites us to differentiate between a linear discipleship—a structured progression of teaching—and a progressive, ascending, and relational discipleship, in which the Holy Spirit guides each believer at different moments of their spiritual formation. This approach aligns with Pauline and Petrine teachings on the manifold wisdom and grace of God (Ephesians 3:10; *1 Peter* 4:10) and the progressive revelation of the gospel (Isaiah 55:11).

Here, the concept of discipleship encompasses a diversity of states, seasons, and levels of spiritual understanding, which only the Holy Spirit fully comprehends. In *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary,* A. A. Trites and William J. Larkin offer an interesting perspective on this ambiguity. The term "disciples" in Acts 19:1, as well as in Acts 19:9 and 19:30, has generated discussion regarding the spiritual identity of these

[21] K. H. Rengstorf, μανθάνω, καταμανθάνω, μαθητής, συμμαθητής, μαθήτρια, μαθητεύω, In G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* electronic ed., Vol. 4, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 406.

individuals. The New Living Translation (NLT) consistently translates "disciples" as "believers," suggesting that Luke considered them Christians. However, scholars remain divided on this point. Some argue that Luke presents them as Christians, reflecting the diversity of convictions within the emerging Christian movement (Kee, 1997). Others suggest that Luke is imprecise in defining their status (Dunn, 1996) or even that there is confusion in their identification (Erickson, 1993). However, the most widely accepted interpretation is that they were disciples of John the Baptist (Keener, 1993; Spencer, 1997; Barrett, 1994). This ambiguity stems from Luke's flexible use of terms like "disciple" and "believer," which requires analyzing the immediate context—particularly Paul's interaction with them in Acts 19:2-6—to determine their true spiritual condition (Witherington, 1998).[22] This contextual detail is key to understanding the nature of discipleship in Acts and the necessity of progressive faith formation.

Implications for the Church's Mission Today

If the church is to fulfill God's mission, it must remain connected to the source of revealed knowledge, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide its missional and formative work (Ephesians 2:10). Swindoll's commentary on Acts highlights that while Luke frequently uses the Greek term *mathētēs* (disciple) to refer to believers, in Acts 19:1, the word specifically denotes Jews who had responded positively to John the Baptist's ministry but had not yet received a complete articulation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, these disciples had received only partial information and had not

[22] A. A. Trites, A. A. William J. Larkin. *Cornerstone biblical commentary, Vol 12: The Gospel of Luke and Acts* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 558.

yet experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit. [23] A similar perspective is found in the *Wesley Study Bible*, which notes that in Acts, the term "disciple" typically indicates someone who belongs to Christ, yet without necessarily implying a full understanding of His message and work.[24] The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Rengstorf supports this interpretation, stating that in Acts, the term "disciple" refers to those who had come to believe in Christ, although their spiritual formation varied significantly.[25]

These studies suggest that within the church, there will always be believers at different levels of knowledge and experience with God's grace in Christ. The challenge of discipleship is to accompany these believers in their growth, helping them experience the full work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The analysis of Acts 19:1 shows that the designation of "disciples" in this passage does not imply complete spiritual maturity but rather a developing process—one in which Paul's interaction with them affirms that spiritual formation is neither static nor uniform but an ongoing transformation guided by the Holy Spirit.

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[23] Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Acts*, Tyndale House Publishers, 2016, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=5395287, last accessed February 12, 2025.

[24] Joel B. Green, Bishop William H. Willimon, eds. *The CEB Wesley Study Bible* , Common English Bible, Electronic Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025, 2012. https://www.logos.com/product/201299/the-wesley-study-bible.

[25] Rengstorf, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic ed., Vol. 4, (Eerdmans), 458.

"Did you receive…"

The question that Paul asks presents a statement that supports the thesis by entering into conversation which listens to a church's context. We are then able to respond, guided by the Holy Spirit, to the church's true needs. Up to this point, Paul's strategy had been to reach the regions and identify the synagogues, meeting places, or the house of a disciple. In fact, the concept "synagogue" is used more than ten times in the Book of Acts and all in relation to Paul (Acts 9:20-22; 13:4-5, 14-43, 44- 49; 14:4-6; 15:21; 17:1-9, 10-15, 16-34; 18:1-4, 19-21, 24-26; 19:8-10; 22:19; 24:12; 26:11). Luke uses it to qualify the context related to Paul's missionary life before his encounter with Christ, during his ministerial development, and when he gave himself completely to the work of the ministry.

In Acts 18, Luke tells us that, in his first direct contact with the people of the region, Paul stopped at the synagogues of the city. This was the strategy that Paul was accustomed to using and it had worked for him. On other occasions we are told that Paul would go to meeting places and argue with the Jews of the region about the Messiah. Like his arrivals in the Berea region (Acts 17: 10-15) and in the Ephesus region, these experiences are totally different.

Luke does not give us details of the place, and we do not know if Paul had any previous contact with the disciples he had met during his first meeting. We do not know if they had heard of Paul. Here, Paul enters into conversation with the disciples after having heard them speak. Swindoll tells us that "Paul probed their understanding to diagnose their need—to determine whether they were ignorant or rebellious. He neither

questioned nor denied their sincerity."[26] In Acts 19:1-7, Luke presents Paul outside of a traditional approach to understanding him when he first arrived in a region to preach. Paul's tendency was to preach at the synagogue; however, in this passage outside the synagogue.

In Acts 19:1-2 Paul enters into conversation about the context to find out where the disciples are in their process and understanding of God's upward-progressive revelation in Christ. In *Acts of the Apostles*, Conzelmann et al state, "One might also consider the possibility that Luke located the scene here in line with his tendency to portray Paul as the initiator."[27] I do not interpret Paul's conversation with the disciples as punitive or prejudiced towards charismatic manifestations. Contrasted to our church in recent days, there is now a significant gap between the time we receive the message, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and move on to witness or model.

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? (Acts 19:2a) …the Holy Spirit when you believed?

Acts: an Introduction and Commentary states,

> Some scholars would translate, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit after you believed?' with the implication that reception of the Holy Spirit is a gift subsequent to belief in Jesus. While this is a possible understanding of the syntax, it is undoubtedly a wrong understanding of the phrase here in its context; it places an unwarranted stress on the 'after' and goes against the constant New Testament association of the Holy Spirit with conversion.[28]

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[26] Charles R Swindoll, "*Insights on Acts.*"

[27] Conzelmann, Hans, Eldon Jay Limburg, James, A. Thomas Kraabel, "*Acts of the Apostles*" Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988), last accessed February 12, 2025, https://muse-jhu-edu.dtl.idm.oclc.org/pub/261/monograph/chapter/1801491.

[28] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), Vol. 5, 324.

The constancy that we sometimes want to delineate – a process of preaching, conversion, and filling with the Holy Spirit – is not an absolute process in the book of Acts. The *Dake Annotated Study Bible* confirms that "there is no definite time for this experience in connection with salvation or the new birth."[29] Paul has his encounter with the Lord and baptized in the waters. However, in the book of Acts, there are no indications of charismatic manifestations such as prophecy or speaking in tongues associated with Paul's conversion and baptism. One of the most powerful aspects of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in Paul's experience occurs in 1 Corinthians 12:3.

So how, then, do we explain Acts 9:5a? Because there was Stephen who awakened in Paul the curiosity to inquire about the message of grace (Jeremiah 29:13). And Stephen's testimony (Acts 7:55-60) is the one that has Paul doubly committed to the cross. Paul, the rule-follower, saw the fallacy of his own religiosity, and committed to turn away from following dogma to following the calling of the Holy Spirit. His second commitment came when he saw he had been forgiven despite having killed Stephen. (1 Corinthians 15:7-9; 2 Timothy 4:8). Acts 10 provides a second example. Cornelius and the people of his house had not confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, nor had they been baptized with water. However, they were filled with the Holy Spirit without following the presumed process of hearing the message, being converted, and then filled with the Holy Spirit. In the case of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit was working to such a degree that Cornelius already had intimate communion with God, knew God's voice, and had visions of God's angels.

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[29] Finis Jennings Dake, "Acts 19:2," *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible*, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Nashville: Dake Publishing, 1997), https://www.logos.com/product/161077/acts.

Regarding the testimony of Apollo, the eloquent preacher from the city of Alexandria, Charles Swindoll says, “Luke doesn't describe a conversion experience for Apollos (cf. 9:1-7), most likely because he had already believed and had already received the Holy Spirit but did not display miraculous abilities.”[30] In all three cases, we see that grace can only be achieved by the Holy Spirit (John 16; 1 Corinthians 12:1-2; Ephesians 2:1-10). We further see that the revelation of God's grace in Christ reaches the human being in the eternal presence of God in a progressive/ascending/circular/spiral manner. Finally, we see that the Holy Spirit is in charge of the whole process (Ephesians 1; 2:1-10).

The *Dake Annotated Reference Bible* adds:

> We have to recognize that one can believe for salvation and be in ignorance of the Holy Spirit baptism, but whatever one gets from God it is when, or after one believes (Mk. 11 :22–24; Mt 17:20; 21:22). The term “after that you believed” does not necessarily mean a time element after faith is exercised. To receive blessings “believe that you receive them, and you shall have them” any moment after faith is exercised (Mk. 11:22–24).”[31]

Conclusion

The exegetical analysis of Acts 19:1-7 affirms the central premise of this study: discipleship is not merely about acquiring doctrinal knowledge but about experiencing an ongoing transformation led by the Holy Spirit. Throughout this passage, Luke presents discipleship as a progressive and dynamic journey, rather than a static or standardized process. Paul’s encounter with the disciples in Ephesus demonstrates that receiving the

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[30] Swindoll, *Insights on Acts.*

[31] Dake, 1997. *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible*.

gospel is not solely an intellectual assent but a continual formation in grace, sanctification, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

This aligns with the Wesleyan theological framework, which emphasizes progressive sanctification and an ever-deepening relationship with God. Just as Paul was not the same person on his second missionary journey as he was in his first, discipleship involves ongoing spiritual renewal and greater responsiveness to the Holy Spirit's guidance. The disciples in Ephesus, though having received some foundational teaching, were still in need of a fuller experience of the Holy Spirit, illustrating that faith communities must cultivate a deep search and dialogue with the Holy Spirit to facilitate holistic transformation.

Moreover, this passage challenges conventional, rigid approaches to discipleship, calling the church to prioritize spiritual discernment over mere methodology. Paul does not impose a one-size-fits-all evangelistic framework but instead engages contextually with these disciples, leading them toward a fuller encounter with God's transformative power. As this study asserts, faith communities that intentionally foster intimacy with the Holy Spirit and adapt their discipleship to the cultural and spiritual realities of their context will experience greater engagement, organic multiplication, and sustainable mission impact.

Ultimately, Acts 19:1-7 reaffirms that the mission of the church is not solely an act of human planning but a collaborative work with the Holy Spirit. True discipleship is marked not only by instruction but by encounter, transformation, and the ongoing empowerment of the Spirit. When the church embraces this model, it moves

beyond institutional maintenance to become a dynamic, Spirit-led movement capable of renewing individuals and communities through the power of the gospel.

The Intentional Discipleship Process

Ephesians 2:8-10; Ephesians 4:12-13

The discipleship process explained in this project is both cyclical and non-linear. We live life experiences that go in cycles, such as the seasons of the year. Similarly, we move through seasons of spiritual understanding and awakening as we walk towards perfection and sanctification in Christ Jesus. At the same time, God revealed Christ Jesus' redemption plan created in a totality. God is our alpha and omega, our beginning and end, living in an eternal present. In God's grace and mercy, God intervenes in our cyclical experiences, transforming them powerfully.

Every human being who has approached God by faith through the sacrifice of Jesus, the Christ of the Living God, is part of the universal church of Jesus Christ. We are his body. This truth goes beyond ethnic, national, denominational, doctrinal, or dogmatic walls (John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:13-16). The salvation that God offers us in Christ Jesus is complete (Colossians 2:10), without the need for any legalistic, religious, or ritual acts. God's purpose is for all believers come to Him through the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God. We strive for perfection as modeled by the fullness of Christ.

The church is the body of Jesus Christ, a living organism called to multiply and grow generatively and healthily. God designs the church as a community of faith to awaken his grace in the believer, train him for every good work, prepare him for the

ministry and send him to model the virtues of God. Nothing we do as human beings to force the growth, multiplication, and development of the church of Jesus Christ will be permanent. That is why the experience of an intentional process of integral discipleship is essential. In it, each believer has a place where he can grow through a unique, organic process, into the new life that God promises in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5: 16-21).

Be To Do

Our culture is distinguished by styles and systems that insist on programming its members to be people who strive to do: to obtain and control. Their actions justify their position in the society that houses them. Only then can they say that they are worthwhile beings. However, in the gospel, which is God's power to transform (Romans 1:15-16), the most important thing is that God saves us so that we may be (John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 2:9-10). God calls us in Christ Jesus to a relationship affirmed and strengthened by being filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then empowers us with God's gifts and ministry. In Christ, our "doing" is God's call to live (Luke 9:23; John 13:34-35; Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 2:10) according to God's will, and to be in relationship with a God who both loves and trusts us infinitely. Because of this love and trust we know that through a relationship with Him we are empowered to model Him in every aspect of our lives.

At the same time, we have no need to prove to others that God love us. We can recall that when Satan tried to tempt Jesus, Jesus had no need to demonstrate his omnipotence. Similarly, we trust that God's fullness is confirmed and affirmed; it becomes evident and undeniable when we model the fruit of the holy spirit as a

manifestation of his presence and power in us (Romans 12:6-10; 1 Corinthians 12:7-12; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 4:11-16). We believe that God in Christ Jesus has called us to be transformed by the holy spirit to live lives transformed by the power of God. Our lives are a palpable transformation manifested in our lifestyles, families, communities, and other contexts. We believe that God created us in Jesus to *be*, turning our lives into the mission to do, and actualize, God's vision come true: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Definition of a Disciple

A disciple is every human being who permits himself to be drawn by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and inspired by God's love and grace to go deeper into God's word, discovering, comprehending, and understanding the motivation of God's love in Christ Jesus revealed. Further, a disciple must develop and emulate the character, identity, and personality of Jesus Christ. Finally, a disciple must seek to be perfected and sanctified by the grace of God to live, walk and act according to the works God designed for life. [32]

The Circular/Ascending/Progressive/Spiral Process of Spiritual Growth

As disciples, we understand that although our discipleship process will be whole and will also include moments of ups and downs. It is a circular/ascending/ progressive/spiral process. We know that at times we'll feel as though no growth is happening at all. At other times we'll feel God has abandoned us. At still other times

[32] "Our Focus," United Methodists of Upper New York, https://www.unyumc.org/news/article/intentional-discipleship-systems-creating-pathways-to-make-disciples, last accessed February 12, 2025.

we'll sabotage our own efforts, falling back into negative thinking and bad behaviors. At these times, when we fail, or feel we failed, it's tempting to quit. This is especially true when we see our own failures in our spiritual growth. Yet despite these misunderstandings and battles against our fallen nature—the past and the sin that plague us—we must stay focused on the truth of Romans 8:35-39:

> [35]Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? [36]As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." [37]No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38]For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, [39]neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Wake up (Awakening, "Be")

John Wesley's sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," significantly contributes to and enriches the understanding of salvation in the context of the "awakening" phase of the discipleship process. This sermon provides a foundational theological framework that emphasizes the necessity of scripture as a guide for understanding salvation. Wesley's insights serve as a vital resource in nurturing the soteriological aspects of this phase, encouraging a deeper exploration and comprehension of salvation through a scriptural lens.

By drawing upon Wesley's teachings, the "awakening" stage is designed to foster an initial awareness and acknowledgment of the need for salvation, as presented within the biblical narrative, thereby setting the stage for a transformative journey of faith and

discipleship. [33] Traditionally, Christianity believes that God's image was granted and entrusted to every human being from creation. This privilege deteriorated with the introduction of sin and fall from God's grace. The corrosive and degenerative presence of sin distorted the senses, the heart, the mind, and the soul. These aspects of our personalities gave us the ability to listen, understand, know, and obey God, consciously and voluntarily.

We believe that on the cross of Jesus Christ, God made provision (Ephesians 2:4-5) to restore and reconcile man and creation with himself. We understand that the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross destroyed all the influence and power of sin, death, the devil, and hell over human beings. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we are justified and forgiven, accepted and restored, reconciled and sanctified, and transformed and glorified to eternal life. Although sin deteriorated and distorted the intimacy of the human being with his creator, Jesus Christ's sacrifice recreated and reconstructed the closeness of God with all creation, especially with human beings. Because the image of God is in every human being, every human being, by regeneration in the blood of Jesus Christ, has been restored to the ability to hear, understand, know, accept, and obey the voice of God again (Titus 3:15). With this said, we declare that everything done is strategically and directed in collaboration with the Holy Spirit to awaken in every human being the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ (John 4:10). This message has already been sown into lives by the constant news of creation, which is why

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[33] John Wesley, *"Sermon: The Scripture Way of Salvation,* http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-43-the-scripture-way-of-salvation/, last accessed February 12, 2025.

we must know, as a non-negotiable, upon listening to the context, to discover where God is working.

Formation (Forming-Framing)

The Ministerial Action Plan (MAP) was designed so that everything that was done as part of the ministry worked as part of the practical concepts and principles for integral spiritual formation (Psalm 139, Isaiah 45:5; Jeremiah 18:1-6). The goal was for every believer to lead a deep spiritual-civic-social life that glorified God. What did we seek to form in every believer? The answer is found on Ephesians 4:13 "This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ." The refers to the ability to learn to live according to the restoration of the fullness of the image of God given in the victory of Jesus Christ's resurrection. We tried to ensure that every believer reaches spiritual maturity. What is spiritual maturity? It is the courage to recognize our complete dependence on God and our interdependence on the faith community. Our "doing," then is the relationship that builds from both this dependence and interdependence.

One of the manifestations of spiritual maturity is a kind of presence that a believer has, a presence that shows the transformation of the Holy Spirit within them. It is represented in both their physical appearance and their behavior. A kind of physical and spiritual shining for God flows out of believers. It is in this that we see believers are so much more than followers of rules. They express the glory of God in all styles and aspects of life as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual maturity also involves

living in a community of mutual responsibility and covenant with the Holy Spirit. The goal of the covenant community is to form in the believer the capacity to develop the character, identity, and personality of Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? We learn the why and the how of the means of grace along with spiritual disciplines. We do this based on the conviction that neither the means of nor spiritual disciplines are ends in themselves. In his essay, "Spiritual Disciplines and John Wesley," Daryl Densford presents findings from his research, emphasizing the importance of understanding that engaging in spiritual disciplines (or any rite or sacrament, for that matter) does not inherently make us holy, spiritual, or Christlike. Rather, these practices serve as tools or pathways to attain such a state. Put differently, spiritual disciplines are not the ultimate goal but are means to achieve that goal.[34] Therefore, they are tools provided by the Holy Spirit to help us tune our systems and our entire being to the voice of God (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24). Only in this way will our senses be coherently regulated and calibrated, our vision cleared, and our hearts properly aligned to listen to and know God's purpose (Isaiah 55:6-11; Romans 12:1-3; Psalm 33:11). Once we can listen and know the heart of God, we will obey and surrender our will out of love. Our hearts, aligned with the heart of God, are the most powerful weapon in our daily spiritual battle as we fight against our fallen nature and the sin that plagues us. The means of grace and spiritual disciplines are tools that form, with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit, in the believer the ability to create attitudes, habits, and lifestyles that glorify God. Why do we do what we do? To prepare and train every believer for the work

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[34] Densford, Daryl, “Here I Sit,” *Spiritual Disciplines and John Wesley*, last accessed February 12, 2025, https://daryldensford.com /2015/02/03/spiritual-disciplines-john-wesley/.

of the ministry and to carry out the works that God created beforehand, to which we have all been called in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8-10).

Equipping-Training (Learning Experience)

The Ministerial Action Plan (MAP) was designed so that everything done as part of the ministry works as part of the practical concepts and principles as comprehensive training for all believers. The goal was to live, share and model a spiritual/civic/social life that glorifies God. We understand that every believer must be enabled to live as a new creation, and enjoy the abundant life that God offers us in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 9:16-17; John 10:10). Discipleship is a lifelong experience. During the learning experience process, we are expected to walk together with each worshiper through the journey of exploration. We help each believer discover her/his gifts, abilities, virtues, and desires. We understand that we are all called to collaborate with God in establishing his kingdom. We understand that God entrusted to us his gifts, abilities, and virtues. By and through God’s spirit, we gain the ability to use all these capabilities for his glory. Once discovered, we work to train, develop, implement, and strengthen each believer according to his/her capacity. The process is specific to each individual, yet interdependent, working with other believers. We believe that God in Christ Jesus has called us to allow the Holy Spirit to turn our lives into the mission of making God's vision come true: "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Modeling (Missional-Evangelist)

The MAP was designed so that everything that is done as part of the ministry will model a spiritual/civic/social life that glorifies God with integrity, fidelity, loyalty, and honesty. Modeling is the great commission that Christ Jesus entrusted to his disciples of all ages, and we remember the commission as a set of intertwined commandments that are both indivisible and inseparable.

Leaning on the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, we proclaim the message and counsel of the full gospel (2 Corinthians 12:10-12). We witness his love and transforming power. That is why we believe that we must be in Jesus Christ to model what he did and how he did it. We are all in the process of discipleship, the road to perfection and sanctification, which is the expression of the fullness of the image of the perfect man: Jesus Christ. Understanding that we are disciples in the process of sanctification should motivate us to share with others what God is doing in our lives.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

When it comes to characters in history who have influenced the lives of others through their lifestyles and decisions they made out of their love for Christ, Susanna Wesley has an especially strong presence. In his book *Streams of Living Water*, author Richard J. Foster interprets the life and ministry of Mrs. Wesley with masterful skill and dexterity, using her to describe what he holds up as the model for the Incarnation Tradition. This modeling explains one of the great truths that we have neglected in teaching and discipling in this church age. Incarnating Christ is the calling of all believers. God is trusting that we are Christ Jesus tangibly present on earth; we are his body. We are his church. Sharing about her life and spiritual formation, Foster quotes one of her famous prayers:

> Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church, or closet, nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in Thy presence. So may my every word and action have a moral content. … May all the happenings of my life prove useful and beneficial to me. May all things instruct me and afford me an opportunity of exercising some virtue and daily learning and growing towards Thy likeness. … Amen.[1]

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[1] Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Englewood, NJ: EPub, Kindle, 2017), Harper Collins ebook. https://a.co/dpA8Mtd 237.

Foster declares that "This prayer, by the by, is one of the finest expressions of the Incarnational Tradition you will ever find."[2] In the historical foundation section of his doctoral thesis, *He Chose Twelve: An Online Leadership Development Model in a Church Planting Process*, Dr. S. Lloyd Walters makes a detailed study of John Wesley, sharing the influence of Susanna Wesley in all the processes and stages of her children's lives. Walters' research led him to conclude that most of the achievements in the Wesleys' lives and ministries were due to the influence of the spiritual and educational formation they received at home, especially all that they received from the heart of their mother. Walters said: "It all began with a young mother who developed a novel and systematic approach to rearing her children."[3]

Susanna Wesley's Childhood and Youth

Susanna Wesley was born in 1669 to Dr. Samuel Annesley, a prominent dissenting minister, and his second wife. She was his 25th child. From the time she was a child, Susanna exhibited an unusual inclination for a life given to God, not a convent life but a practical one. Little Susanna was Annesley's favorite daughter, and he took charge of her education completely, becoming her personal tutor and teacher. Under his tutelage, and in an era where women were excluded from educational opportunities, Susanna learned Greek, French, metaphysics, logic, theology and a variety of other subjects, such

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[2] Foster, *Streams*, 237-238.

[3] Walters S. Lloyd, *"He Chose Twelve: An Online Leadership Development Model in a Church Planting*, last accessed February 13, 2025, https://archive.org/details/s-lloyd-walters-dmin-2021/mode/2up.

as anatomy.[4] Susanna passed this educational rigor onto her own children in the home school she founded as a mother.

At the age of thirteen Susanna focused intently on debating the articles of faith and theologies of the churches of England. Her eloquence earned her the nickname, “a theologian in short dresses.”[5] Apparently, her eloquence emboldened her to present and defend the arguments, then to request permission from her father to change her theological position.

Susanna began making her voice heard at a young age, when she, with solid arguments, defended her position and her theological convictions before her father. These conversations led her to explore her option to transfer from the church that her father pastored to the Church of England. Her father, persuaded by her logic, accepted her decision and granted his permission and blessing.

Spiritual Formation and Discipline

As pastors, our parishioners often ask, “Why do I need spiritual formation?” Susanna answered this question eloquently in response to a letter from her son John Wesley, who asked her about the influence and operation of sin in the human being. Susanna replied:

> How would you judge the lawfulness or lawlessness of "pleasure?" Use this rule: Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sight of God, takes from you your thirst for spiritual things or increases the authority of your body over your mind, then that thing to you is evil.

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[4] “Wesley, Susanna (1669–1742),” Encyplopedia.com, last accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/wesley-susanna-1669-1742.

[5] Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 238.

> By this test you may detect evil no matter how subtly or how plausibly temptation may be presented to you.[6]

Her testimony shows us that it is not necessary to move to a monastery to live and do ministry—ministry happens wherever we are. Her life left us the legacy that becomes a Christian life and ministry in the community that shelters us, especially in the one that is not religious. Wherever we are, we can be agents of transformation.

Susanna Wesley's understanding of ministry, and her desire to know God, was remarkable. Charles Wallace, author of *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings,* shares a powerful note entered in Susanna's journal about the true relationship of intimacy with God beyond religion:

> My joys are all centered in him, and it is to him. same whom I desire; it is his favor, it is his acceptance, his communications of grace, that I long for more than anything in the world; and that I have no taste or delight in anything when I am afraid of his displeasure.[7]

This note was one of many that she produced during her daily moments of biblical reflection and prayer. She took time to write and pray by covering her head and shoulders with the kitchen apron she wore. Anyone in the house, or in her immediate neighborhood, who saw her "under her meeting tent"[8] became silent, knowing that this was her time to be alone with God.

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[6] "Susanna Wesley > Quotes,"Goodreads.com, last accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/474367.Susanna_Wesley.

[7] Charles Wallace, ed." *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*," (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) 1997, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, last accessed February 13, 2025, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=272767.

[8] Jackie Green, Lauren Green-Mcafee, "Leaving a Legacy of Prayer: The Praying Example of Susanna Wesley," *Faith Gateway*, last accessed February 13, 2025, https://faithgateway.com/blogs/.

Susanna Wesley gave birth to nineteen children, nine of whom survived beyond infancy. This raises a number of questions about her mental health and her capacity to persevere. How many depressions and burnouts did she experience? What about compassion fatigue and simple physical exhaustion? Studies on the mental and emotional state of women during pregnancy provide insights. With pregnancy and childbirth come weight loss and gain, as well as hormonal, gastric and digestive, circulatory and dental changes. Each pregnancy is different, but almost all pregnancies are marked by a common denominator: depression. Depression[9] can be experienced at all stages of pregnancy as well as after childbirth, commonly known as post-partum depression, or "baby blues."[10]

And children were not the only challenges in her life. She lived in a time of social, political, and economic upheaval as well. Who can explain how a woman who experienced nineteen births (and who knows how many depressions), without a great deal of support from her frequently absent husband, was able to raise her children, keep her business in order, attend to the community of faith, and take two hours a day to be in the presence of God? Susanna's testimony demonstrates power which is possible when sustained by an intimate life in the presence of God.

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[9] Mayo Clinic Staff, *"Depression During Pregnancy: You Are Not Alone,* https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/depression-during-pregnancy/art-20237875.

[10] Mayo Clinic Press, "Postpartum Depression," *Healthy Lifestyle Pregnancy week by week,* last accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/postpartum-depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20376617.

Wife and Mother

Susanna Wesley demonstrated that she was supremely capable of a disciplined life of prayer and reading of the Scriptures. Her discipline and consistency fueled her surrender to God, thus developing her faith and convictions. Her spiritual formation nurtured in her an exceptional commitment to her husband, marriage and the fruit of her conjugal relationship.

At the age of nineteen, on November 12,1688, Susanna married [11] a young minister, Samuel Wesley, in St. Marylebone Parish Church in London. Throughout her life she dedicated herself to giving the ten children who survived past infancy an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual life in a balanced, individualized and collective way. Like any marriage, the Wesley's relationship was tinged with multiple events of grief and loss, achievements, and breakthroughs. In the case of the Wesleys, pain and loss seemed to outnumber achievements and advances.

Several of the historians and biographers described Samuel Wesley as a devoted father and husband who was a hard-working minister and effective administrator of his church's limited resources. Although historians and biographers do not completely agree with the details, it seems that the couple separated for a period of six to twelve months because of their religious and political differences.[12]Another tough experience was Samuel's incarceration in a debtor's prison. His creditors, who in some cases were his parishioners, had him jailed. The Wesley family also experienced several fires in their

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[11] Arthur S. Lloyd Walters, *"He Chose Twelve: An Online Leadership Development Model in a Church Planting,"* (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 2021), 46.

[12] Walters, 46.

parsonage, and they are believed to have been started by angry creditors. One of those fires almost claimed the life of young John Wesley.

The 16 Rules

Susanna Wesley's child-rearing was biblically based; she believed in the truth of Hebrews 12:11 No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. Susanna Wesley thought that for a child to grow into a self-disciplined adult, he/she must first be a parent-disciplined child. To her, the stubborn flesh was the hardest battle for Christians to fight, and godly parents would do well to equip their children to overcome it early. She writes:

> When the will of a child is totally subdued, and it is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents, then a great many childish follies...may be passed by. . .. I insist on the conquering of the will of children before because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education...when this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by reason and piety.[13]

Due to the atmosphere in which Mrs. Wesley was formed spiritually and educationally, it is not difficult to discern the importance of these priorities in her children's lives. Susanna made it an irrefutable and non-negotiable priority that all of her offspring learn to read the Bible and pray about what they read in scripture. Susanna Wesley understood that the first thing that she had to instill in her children was spiritual formation. For Mrs. Wesley, spiritual formation was an irrefutable essential part of any discipleship process.

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[13] *Open Arms Magazine*, "Susanna Wesley's 16 Rules of Parenthood," last accessed February 13, 2025, http://www.openarmsmagazine.com/Susanna%20Wesley%20Rules.pdf.

In the context of this paper, the discipleship process refers to a system of formation, education, mentoring and framing-training that invites us to walk a journey of faith step by step until Christ Jesus is formed in each member who participates. The experience of reading the scriptures and praying about them is essential to awaken, form and train the recipient in the gift of listening to God with the desire to obey him out of love. The constant use of means of grace awakens, forms and enables the recipient of grace to experience God in awe. Fear and reverence come with the gift of grace because God's majesty and sovereignty, goodness and favors, grace and holiness have been revealed to him. The system that Susanna designed and implemented achieved both objectives at all stages of her children's growth in a quantifiable and measurable way. The virtue of loving and fearing God out of conviction has a high chance of being formed in the believer when an interconnected/circular system of discipleship (education, mentoring and training) is integrated. Susanna's homeschooling proved that such an approach is the starting point for the participants to learn to love and fear God as an achievable goal, step by step.

Once the mechanism of the process is activated, the participant, based on individual capacity, begins to grow, and develops the ability to hear, see and understand God. She or he develops the fiber and conviction that one can obey and love within a community. The individual life and care that Susanna offered to each of her offspring fought against individualism and competition, creating awareness of the value of a united family. It created value that gave rise to respect for individuality but also mutual responsibility. At home, as part of their discipleship process, the Wesley siblings

discovered the synergistic strength of the intimate communion of a community of faith that lives in a covenant of mutual responsibility.

Today, the rules of life in the Wesley household seem somewhat rigid and outdated. However, what made the difference was that rather than simply imposing this rule she applied this rule in community, with justice and empathy, while considering each child's individual needs. She understood that this must be done with painstaking care, consistency, and tenderness.

One day, one of her daughters wished to do something which was not altogether bad, but which was not right. When she was told not to do it, the daughter was not convinced. It was late and she and her mother were sitting beside a dead fire. Her mother said to her: "Pick up that bit of coal." "I don't want to," said the girl. "Go on," said her mother. "The fire is out; it won't burn you." "I know that," said the girl. "I know it won't burn me, but it will blacken my hands." "Exactly," said Susannah Wesley. "That thing which you wish to do won't burn, but it will blacken. Leave it alone."[14]

Susanna Wesley's 16 Rules were:

1. Eating between meals not allowed.
2. 8 p.m. bedtime for children
3. Children are taking medicine without complaining.
4. Subdue a child's self-will. Adults work together with God to save the child's soul.
5. Teach a child to pray as soon as s/he can speak.
6. Be still during family worship.

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[14] Open Arms, "16 Rules of Parenthood."

7. Give children something only when asked for it politely, not when they demand it.
8. To prevent lying, punish no fault which is first confessed and repented.
9. Never allow a sinful act to go unpunished.
10. Never punish a child twice for a single offense.
11. Comment on and reward good behavior.
12. Any attempt to please, even if poorly performed, should be commended.
13. Preserve property rights, even in smallest matters.
14. Strictly observe all promises.
15. Require no daughter to work before she can read well.
16. Teach children to fear the rod.

Discipline designed and applied with love and extensive communication has never killed anyone. In fact, it has transformed millions of lives. One of Samuel Wesley's biographers says that once, when coming upon Susanna calmly teaching one of the children, he remarked, "I marvel at your patience! You have told that child the same thing twenty times." Looking fondly at the child, Susanna replied, "Had I spoken the matter only nineteen times, I should have lost all my labor."[15] The art of disciplining, educating, and discipling must be accompanied by patience, repetition, and love.

[15] Coker, Abby, "Susanna Wesley: The Mother of Methodism," *My Hero*, last accessed February 13, 2025, https://myhero.com/S_Wesley_potter_US_2010.

Influence on the Movement of Methodism

Some historians and theologians believe that Susanna Wesley strongly represents the mindset of Methodism. A video produced by the communications team of The United Methodist Church, "Susanna Wesley: Mother of Methodism,"[16] depicts her not only as the mother of the Methodist movement but also as the representation of millions of Christian women who had no voice at that time. Susanna's work laid the foundation for future generations of good mothers and teachers, hard workers, and faithful missionaries, who lacked denominational titles or credentials. Her convictions, discernment and example inspired major changes in the nascent Methodist movement in the early 1700s when religious authors in Frankfurt and Leipzig authors had created a document that demonized women in the church and condemned their intervention in the ministry.

Rev. Samuel Wesley was sometimes absent from both home and the congregation for up to several months at a time. During one of his absences, Samuel left his assistant, Mr. Inman, in charge of preaching and pastoral care. Inman selected a series of sermons that referred to the need to pay off debts. The congregation felt offended because they believed these sermons alluded to Mr. Wesley's constant problems with creditors. Susanna intervened, summoning the congregation to meet with her, to listen to her reading of these sermons, and to pray about what they heard. To Inman's surprise, more than a hundred people met in the Wesley's kitchen to hear these sermons. The critics attacked, contacting Rev. Wesley in London, and asking that Susanna stop what she was

[16] United Methodist Church Communications, "Susanna Wesley: Mother of Methodism," last accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.umc.org/en/content/susanna-wesley-mother-of-methodism.

doing. Susanna replied that she was holding what she called "our society meetings,"[17] and believed fully that she was doing God's work.

John Wesley was only nine years old when this happened, and this incident had a profound impact on his work. Several decades later he developed the famous Methodist Societies which were designed to provide support in a small group faith community. These small groups organically shaped the mindset of Methodism.

Several other strategies that served as the basis for the Methodist movement were based on the spiritual principles and values that Susanna instilled in her children. Susanna helped Methodists to learn to live in a covenant community, with a life of prayer and devotion to God, and working in small groups. Even when the world around her opposed her, she was determined to perpetuate this form of ministry.

Thomas Maxfield was a layman full of God's grace and favor, who figured prominently into the early revival of the Methodist movement. During this time, Susanna's sons, John, and Charles, preached throughout the ministry base. Thomas was not ordained and therefore was not authorized to preach but presided over small groups and classes. However, when John and Charles were not available to preach, Thomas elected to let himself be used by God and took over their duties. Susanna reported to her son John, saying,

> "…you know what my feelings have been. You cannot suspect me of favoring readily anything of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man; for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching from him and hear him yourself."[18]

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[17] Foster, Richard J., *Streams of Living Water,* Kindle Edition (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2017). 244.

[18] Foster, *Streams,* 246.

This admonition, which John and Charles heeded, forever changed the history of Methodism by recognizing and authorizing Maxwell as the first lay preacher. Spiritual formation and investing in the laity as an essential part of God's strategy for the church as an agent of transformation began to produce results. All of this stemmed from Susanna's remarkable discipline and character. John Wesley translated his mother's commands, style, discipline, and determination into a practical way and elaborated on it in so that he was able to apply it, making it part of the ministerial tools of the nascent Methodist movement.

Applying Susanna's Methods

As a district superintendent I was constantly challenged with people leaving our churches, and the inability to connect with and recruit new people to our denomination. Furthermore, I was faced with the spiritual problem of developing a healthy generative multiplication and discipleship process. I believed this is because we are doing church without solidifying the spiritual foundation we are building. This made me ask, on what kind of ground are we throwing our spiritual seed?

Fortunately, Susanna Wesley's children, and subsequent generations of Methodists, inherited the principles of her strategic mind, therefore shaping their ministry. Why, then, do we as Wesleyan heirs do ministry without a clear and confirmable foundation of faith? Why isn't there a ministry plan and disciple-making process? The covenant life and community that Susanna built for her young children was a unique pattern, though not perfect. I believe that she speaks to the needs that we

experience today in the absence of discipleship processes. The atmosphere that Susanna created together with her husband and the team of people who collaborated with her was exceptional and we can still learn a lot from her system.

In my work I also discovered that we have neglected to preach the manifold grace of God as a revealed message that demands a personal, progressive, and ascending experience of spiritual growth. That message works as an interconnected circular system. During my research it became apparent that, as an institution, we insist on upholding dogmas, traditions, doctrines and creeds without encouraging people to have a personal experience with God. Such an absence is the easiest way to control the masses in a systematic-linear way, and we have been doing for the past decades.

Notable in the system that Susanna created is the absence of imposed control and manipulation. Although her system, at first glance, could be described as rigid, the rigidity that she manifests does not speak of a lack of flexibility, empathy, or room for negotiation. Susanna implemented each rule with love, dialogue, and tenderness. Each meeting sought to transform the character of each child without denigrating that child's identity, motivating them to grow and mature based on their individual personality. And that is the goal of the transforming gospel message of Jesus Christ. The development of our character in Christ Jesus is what is manifested in all our styles and responses to daily living.

The absence of a personal experience obstructs the possibility of learning to listen attentively and willingly to know the love of God revealed. I believe that because we do not know how to teach people to love God, we have a religious culture that lives by modeling a lack of fear of God. This culture resists developing a deep life of personal and

spiritual intimacy with God. This results in a community of faith that claims to know God but lacks the ability to obey so that God glorified is unknown.

The systems of spiritual formation and ethical and civic education that Susanna Wesley designed for her children points out our own lack of deep spirituality. How do her methods impact us? She challenges us to evaluate our method of teaching and making disciples. Susanna had a commitment to the God that allowed her to be a mother, and that commitment was sealed with God's covenant life.

Teaching about God without knowing God is dead, static, empty religion. For this reason, God's first objective with each individual offspring is to expose her or him to the very presence of God for their own personal encounter. Then, that encounter is affirmed in the community of faith as they invest in each other. This objective must be taken up in each community of faith, through small groups – bands. Today we need to rediscover the individual and collective need to have a personal encounter with God.

As we attempt to discern how we have become the church we are today, we find a wide diversity of explanations. While relying on reality, they are divorced from the truth. We have heard about the demographic changes in our country, and the restructuring and reconfiguration of our families and communities. Some say that people are not interested in the gospel message and that the church as an entity is no longer relevant. These responses are supported by contextual reality but divorced from biblical and historical truth.

The church of the first century was born, grew, and multiplied in the midst of a society totally adverse to its message, values and principles. Marginalized communities, living in extreme poverty, lack of equity and had no influence in governmental spheres.

The book of the Acts of the apostles gives us several examples of what God can do when we give ourselves permission to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal the needs of the context—where and with whom he is already working, and how he expects us to collaborate with the context. With this understanding, we can advance the agenda that is already in place. The question that must be asked is how relevant, practical and true is Christ, his power, his message for us the Church today.

If anything was relevant, practical, and true to Susanna, it was God. Her devotional life was evidence that she lived fully convinced of the transforming power of God. All the crises, situations and adversities that she experienced not only endured but triumphed over because of her faith. God's revealed message in Christ was always absolute truth for Susanna.

The England of Susanna Wesley's day is not far from the lifestyles of today's society. Social crises are similar—we are faced with alcoholism, opiate abuse, child abuse, infanticide, racial/ethnic discrimination, and a loss of women's rights. Such crises seem new to us, but they have a historical precedence. The solution proposed by John and Charles Wesley was to apply the discipleship process learned from their mother. This discipleship process involves a system of framing-training, education, and mentoring that invites us to walk a journey of faith step by step until Christ Jesus is formed in each member who participates.

The experience of reading the scriptures and praying about them is essential to awaken, form, and train the recipient in the gift of listening to God with the desire to obey him out of love. The constant use of the means of grace awakens, forms and enables the recipient of grace to experience awe of God. The fear and reverence that come with

the gift of grace because of God's majesty and sovereignty, goodness, favors, and holiness is revealed.

The system that Susanna designed and implemented achieved objectives at all stages of her children's growth in a quantifiable and measurable way. The virtue of loving and fearing God out of conviction has a high chance of being formed in the believer when an interconnected/circular system of discipleship (education, mentoring and framing-training) is integrated into the believer's life. Susanna's homeschooling proved that such an approach is the starting point for the participants to establish as an achievable goal, step by step, learning to love and fear God.

Today we continue to face one of the oldest problems in the church. It is the absence of laity involved in the ministry. It is said that 20% do the work while 80% serve as critical consumers and viewers. Susanna was the one who injected the challenge of giving the opportunity to the lay ministry in the Methodist movement.
Because of that inspiration Methodism expanded powerfully around the world. Methodism was also one of the first denominations to give women the opportunity to minister and be ordained.

Conclusion

Susanna Wesley was a radical, transforming agent who made a difference with the decisions she made and the actions she helped to provoke. Susanna was the one who invited her son into new dimensions of understanding, especially when it came to laity. The implementation of the classes and bands were greenhouses, incubator systems for leaders, missionaries and preachers. The training and follow-up groups were spaces that

were intentionally created to develop empathy, respect and mutual investment in the growth of the members.

Provision for the needs of the mission was always within the reach of the Wesley brothers, but the rigidity and bureaucracy of the religious system of their day did not allow them to see it. Thanks to the training they received, in which they learned not to allow a rule to be fully inflexible, they gave themselves permission to listen and contemplate from another dimension. Today we face the same crisis of spiritual leadership, and the answer remains the same: the laity.

The lack of discipleship processes (greenhouses/incubators) in my churches creates limits, yet it should not be accepted as an absolute that limits and cancels the possibility of discovering Christ to create strong followers and transformational leaders. The church is the body of Christ on earth and has a clearly defined mission. Therefore, the Christ-following transformational leaders that are needed to carry out the mission of the church are in our midst. God has already provided for his vision. Susanna speaks to this project, inviting me to listen with empathy to each person I serve and to stop looking for what I want to find, instead of focusing on what God has already provided.

Susanna was invested in each of her children and managed to bring out the best in each one of them while she had them in her care. When they became adults, she acted as a coach, asking the difficult questions and getting out of the way so that each one could build their own answers. Yes, the resources will be limited, but they are the resources provided by the owner of the crop. The responsibility of walking the disciple process with love, tenderness, patience and empathy is what will make the difference.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Why does transformative leadership elude us in the 21st-century church? One important reason is the absence of a comprehensive ministry and disciple-making strategy which is supported by a theological doctrine explaining the process of salvation and sanctification. To explore this issue in my pursuit of a doctoral program in ministry, I investigated a topic entitled "A Creative and Innovative Discipleship Process for the 21st Century Church: Integrating Sanctifying Theology, Spiritual Formation, and Neuroplasticity in the Disciple Development." This project had a particular focus on developing practical recommendations for implementing ministerial leadership.

My project contended that ecclesiastical communities, including faith circles, congregations, and ministries which adopt and emphasize a structured and concise discipleship approach, would experience increased rates of engagement and retention. This discipleship approach aims to reinforce both the spiritual depth and ministerial competencies of its constituents. These increased rates of engagement would be evident among both the core fellowship and within the broader society with which these communities integrate.

The hypothesis for this topic was rooted in the belief that genuine discipleship provides more than profound spiritual nurturing. Genuine discipleship equips believers with tangible skills to navigate their personal lives, families, ministerial vocations, and the broader communities they inhabit. The synergy of spiritual depth, combined with ministerial proficiency, has the potential to enhance the church's appeal among members of the larger community, addressing its many spiritual and practical needs in an ever-evolving world. In navigating the complex challenges of the contemporary world and charting a favorable trajectory for the church, it is imperative to provide strategies that are inherently adaptive. My hypothesis postulated that an effective and meticulously devised discipleship program might emerge as a key strategy, underpinning the growth and vitality of the ecclesiastical community in the 21st century. Based on my theological understanding of the Wesleyan ethos, there are several questions that must be answered in exploring my hypothesis

The Wesleyan Exposition Sanctification and its Impact on Transformational Leadership

As a United Methodist minister, the way the Wesley brothers articulated their understanding and order of salvation held special significance for my life. The connection between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience is commonly referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.[1] This methodology for theological reflection forms the

[1] Alan K. Waltz, *A Dictionary for United Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1991), https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the.

foundation for understanding the process of salvation. In Wesleyan theology, salvation is viewed as expressing the manifold grace of God in three inseparable dimensions: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace.

The theology of sanctification, rooted in an appreciation of God's prevenient grace and translated into the experience of justification, leads new believers toward sanctification driven by conviction rather than mere religiosity. Kevin M. Watson, in his book: *Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification: The Lost Power of the Methodist Movement*, shared that in the Wesleyan tradition, John Wesley believed that Methodism was privileged to be the recipient of a divine "grand depositum:"[2] the message of entire sanctification, Christian perfection. By this, Wesley meant that God had deposited or entrusted Methodism with something of great worth and importance. (Watson, 2021)

The connection established between God's grace revealed to humanity and the active, living, and real work of the Holy Spirit reconciles the message of the early church with the enduring promise of God to the church across time. Dr. Justo L. González,[3] in one of in his writings, shared his understanding of sanctification according to John Wesley. González said that Rev. Wesley held the view that while justification is a singular event, sanctification is a progressive process that builds upon justification. Wesley stressed the importance of preaching and teaching about Christian perfection, or "full sanctification," to avoid portraying the pursuit of sanctification as futile and unachievable.

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[2] Kevin Watson, *Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification—the Lost Power of the Methodist Movement*, Kindle edition, chap.1, loc. 350 (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2021), 202.

[3] Justo L. González, *Essential Theological Terms* Kindle Edition, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), loc. 3695.

Wesley acknowledged that few achieve perfection in this life, citing only three or four examples. Yet he emphasized the necessity of presenting full sanctification as the ultimate aim of Christian life. This Wesleyan focus gave rise to the holiness movement, one aspect of which asserted that the "second blessing" of full sanctification occurs more frequently than Wesley himself believed. (González, 2005)

The Distinction between the Written and the Oral Torah

There is a profound distinction between the written and oral Torah. The former is the pure word of God, unadulterated by human contribution. The latter represents a partnership, where the word of God is interpreted through the human mind. (Sacks, 2010) The theology of the Holy Spirit, essential in the church, brings forth the glory and presence of the written Torah. In his article, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification in the Writing of John Wesley," author William M. Arnett prompts us to consider how the work of the believer's entire sanctification is vital for their life and testimony on earth. Arnett posits that the presence and work of the Holy Spirit are active in all stages of salvation. Arnett's research focuses on four key aspects found in John Wesley's writings regarding the order and process of salvation, where the Holy Spirit plays a vital role. These four interconnected elements include, first, the groundwork done by the Holy Spirit before reaching a state of complete sanctification; second, the initial steps taken by the Holy Spirit during the process of complete sanctification; third, the cleansing action carried out by the Holy Spirit as part of complete sanctification, with

Wesley using different terms for this; and last, the affirmation provided by the Holy Spirit during the entire sanctification process. [4]

The Experience of Grace

Grace, as a sanctifying process (sanctifying grace), embodies the experience that God has always envisioned—inviting humanity to actively participate in the process of sanctification. An essay by the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks[5] on Israel's journey through the desert to the promised land, illuminates Moses' experience with the second tablets of the law. Rabbi Sacks described Moses' first encounter with the revelation of the law as supernatural but passive. In contrast, the second encounter was supernatural, but also active, attentive, participatory, analytical, introspective, critical, and comforting. These qualities created a lasting transformative experience. (Sacks, 2010)

My invitation is this: let us enter into God's presence, recognizing that our sin hinders intimacy. We must trust and rely on God’s grace and mercy (Lamentations 3:23). This reliance forms a covenant between the God who reveals Himself and humanity, which perceives, analyzes, and interprets God's light and presence. Moses emerged radiating the light and glory of God, as described by the apostle Paul as the glory destined for the church.

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[4] William M. Arnett, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification in the Writings of John Wesley," *The Asbury Seminarian:* Vol. 29: No. 2, (April 2, 1974): 5-23, https://place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol29/iss2/3.

[5] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible, Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, Kindle Edition (London: Maggid Books, 2010), chap. 9, sec. 4.

The Order of Salvation in Wesleyan Theology

The order of salvation in Wesleyan theology is presented as a gift from God in Jesus Christ. The Wesley brothers, acknowledging humanity's total depravity, taught that humans cooperate with God at every stage of the salvific experience. In his book *Pentecost and Sanctification in the Writings of John and Charles Wesley*, author Laurence W. Wood[6] shared the first publication the Wesley brothers put together in relation to the order of salvation:

> Indeed, how God may work we cannot tell. But the general manner where he does work is this.... Those who once trusted in themselves and "see the wrath of God hanging over their heads" will "cry unto the Lord, and he shows he hath taken away their sins." "Knowing they are justified... they have peace with God." (Wood, 2018)

Salvation, understood as a divine gift, manifests through God's grace in multiple expressions: prevenient, justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying. These expressions of grace function in an interconnected and interdependent manner within the believer. Prevenient grace operates before we decide to fully commit ourselves to the Lord, that is, before conversion. Its purpose is to persuade us to cease resisting God and to commit to Him definitively. This process can last for months or even years. The faith community bears the responsibility of accompanying the believer and awakening their desire to fully heed the gospel. The focus of grace at this stage is to expand the understanding of the gospel message as described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:1-8.

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[6] Laurence Wood, *Pentecost and Sanctification in the Writings of John Wesley and Charles Wesley with a Proposal for Today*, Kindle Edition (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2018), 50.

Justifying grace comes alive when we decide to accept by faith that Christ is our justification. This grace removes guilt and bestows God's forgiveness. It is believed that upon its manifestation, it induces a change in the believer's nature, freeing them from the power of sin. It also impacts the relationship with God. The previously resistant believer is transformed and begins to understand the importance of submitting to divine sovereignty.

Sanctifying grace aims to empower the human will to live responsible discipleship, advancing towards the perfection of Christian love. Sanctification teaches obedience to God. Unlike the path of resistance and disobedience, the believer now seeks to obey. Sanctification is a process of spiritual growth that provides the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience, with disobedience causing a temporary separation from God, while obedience strengthens the relationship with Him. Grace, by offering constant opportunities for obedience, encourages the development of the habit of listening to and following God. Practicing obedience hones the ability to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit, crucial for undertaking divine tasks. Repeatedly ignoring these promptings can lead to a loss of interest and diminished spiritual sensitivity.

Methodism, as the custodian-depository of the message of complete sanctification, found it necessary to establish a distinction between the experience of being justified in Christ and the process of sanctification. Although both are aspects of a single grace and salvation, they manifest at different stages of the believer's progressive journey of faith. The theology and order of salvation in the Wesleyan tradition acknowledges that there is a time interval between justification and sanctification. A new believer can testify to the peace and joy received once the Holy Spirit enlightens their

understanding to accept God's grace and become justified in Christ. The experience of feeling accepted and forgiven is, indeed, real. At this time John Wesley also began to make a distinction between being born of God in the lower sense (i.e., justifying faith) and being born of God in the highest sense of Christian perfection. (Wood, 2018)

The order of salvation in Wesleyan theology intricately and inseparably intertwines the manifestation and operation of God's grace in the human experience. This process, with its transcendent capabilities, is grounded, nurtured, and structured by sacred scripture. Consequently, the inspiration that breathed life into Methodism as a movement – to fill the earth with Biblical holiness - can be revisited and rearticulated for today's culture. This reiteration reflects a commitment to adapt and apply timeless theological principles to contemporary contexts, ensuring the enduring relevance and impact of Wesleyan teachings.

The Holy Spirit's Role in Orchestrating and Applying Christ's Redemptive Work to Utterly Depraved Humanity

The task of arranging Jesus Christ's vicarious work into a pleasant and peaceful message for the human heart, despite its context, condition, and comprehension of God's purpose, belongs to the Holy Spirit of the triune God. Given that humanity is devoid of God's glory due to total depravity, the salvation offered in Jesus Christ is a gift, hence, it is by grace. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, shares his understanding of humanity's condition—far from and incapable of reconciling with God—in the following terms: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1-

3). The *Dake Annotated Reference Bible*[7] describes this as the quintuple state of depravity in which humanity finds itself as a result of falling from God's grace. Dake, in endeavoring to interpret Paul's proposed order of salvation, outlines a framework describing the irreparable condition of humanity. He points out that in Ephesians 2, the apostle presents the divine solution and provision for reconciling humanity to itself (Ephesians 2:4-9): "...for by grace you have been saved," "...it is the gift of God."

The salvation God offers in Christ is the regeneration of humanity. As a regeneration, a new beginning, the triune God, in His sovereignty and mystery, recreates the movement of the Holy Spirit, just as at the beginning of creation "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." In the regeneration offered in Christ, this Spirit moves over all creation, giving life. Through the prophet's voice, God's promise, as part of the progressive and continuous revelation of the divine redemption plan, was as follows: "I will give you a new heart (Ezekiel 36:25-27)" and "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28).

Humanity, in its total degradation and degeneration, lives and celebrates its free will. Because of its free will, humanity has the freedom to either heed or ignore the proclamation of the complete counsel of God's good news. This message, which God intends to be proclaimed through His manifold grace and wisdom, is announced as a gift bestowed and granted through the operation of the Holy Spirit. According to the apostle Paul, the gift of grace is not a charisma of the Holy Spirit, it is a "Doron."

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[7] Dake, *Annotated Reference Bible*.

Salvation as "Doron" and not as "Charisma" of the Holy Spirit

Commonly, authors in the New Testament refer to a "gift," using the term "charisma" (Strong G5486). However, in Ephesians 2:8, the concept Paul uses to describe God's operation through the proclamation of the message is "*doron*" (Strong G1435). According to Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, in an article by Büchsel,[8] the Greek concept that embodies "gift" in this passage is part of an interesting set of concepts. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* provides synonyms for the term "doron." By consolidating the synonyms of "doron" and applying them to the context in which Paul uses it, one could deduce that salvation is a gift from the sovereign God, who, in His manifold grace and wisdom, crafts an individualized, personalized dose for each human being in Christ.

Human beings, having been wired since creation with the image of God, despite their fall, are allowed by God to retain their free will and faith. However, the faith with which humans live, act, and evolve is what the book of James calls "dead faith," without works that glorify God. Nevertheless the "doron" that God created as the individualized, personalized dose in His sovereignty for each human being in Christ is received through the faith that glorifies God. The faith that glorifies God is included in the manifold operation of God's grace and wisdom, administered, and is a function of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit is fundamental, indispensable, and essential in making known the salvation of God in Christ Jesus revealed. The same spirit that moved over the face of the waters when there was only chaos and darkness is the same one that

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[8] Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, last accessed February 14, 2025, https://www.logos.com/product/390/the-theological-dictionary-of-the-new-testament-abridged-in-one-volume?queryId=eda80a916d353348b5681b7facbc1ef1.

moves over every human being. Hence, the message of the gospel confirms the words of the prophet Isaiah. It refers to the power of the word given by the spirit of God when he said that “it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish what I please.” (Isaiah 55:10-11) To which Paul, regardless of how and under what attitude the gospel is preached, says, “in every way Christ is proclaimed.” (Phil 1:18)

Once human beings, despite their total depravity and degeneration, use free will to allow themselves to listen to the message, the Holy Spirit—who is to take what is Christ's, and who knows the depths and intentions of God's heart—confirms by infusing and inoculating what Christ has already paid, for all creation. This act awakens in that human being a desire to hear the message on another level because they have been granted the “doron.” The operation of the Holy Spirit, ministering in the mystery of God's manifold grace and wisdom, moves in the same dimension by holistically working in people to enable them to operate in the manifold faith of God. Paul describes the faith of God as “one faith.” It is both a singular and multifaceted faith, the faith that saves. It is faith which is both a gift and a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley’s Perspective on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit

When it comes to the issue of the second work of grace/baptism—the baptism of the Holy Spirit--as a work for the sanctification of the believer, John Wesley shared something that could be considered monumental. The author of *Pentecost and Sanctification in the Writings of John and Charles Wesley* explains it this way:

In 1754 John Wesley said in *The Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* that the disciples before Pentecost were justified and enjoyed a measure of the love of God, but as a result of the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, their love for God would be greatly enlarged.[9] This statement helps distinguish the various stages of the progressive work of God's grace in the believer. By reconstructing the biblical narrative of the different events on the day of resurrection, the distinctions and work of the Holy Spirit in the process of salvation become clear.

The disciples had not received the ability to develop the revelation of believing with full certainty and conviction in the vicarious work of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, they had not understood the resurrection or what it represented in their relationship with the Holy Spirit, the so-called to the sanctification they had received, or how it operated in the dimension of the kingdom of God on earth. John Wesley explained the understanding of the order of salvation and work of the Holy Spirit in the believer as "the disciples before Pentecost were justified and enjoyed a measure of the love of God" (Wood, 2018).

Let's reconstruct the events of the first day of the resurrection. In Luke 24:13-35, Jesus appears to the Emmaus walkers and begins to speak theologically with them. As Jesus, the resurrected one, shared the scriptures with them from the dimension of the resurrection, the words of the resurrected one caused burning in the hearts of those who received them. Breaking bread with the recipients was equally powerful, because this opened Jesus's understanding to God's new relationship with human beings. The

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[9] Wood, *Pentecost and Sanctification in the Writings of John Wesley and Charles Wesley with a Proposal for Today*, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2018), https://emethpress.com/shop/9781609471224/.

experience they lived motivated them to return to Jerusalem despite rumors of persecution. In John 20:22-23, already in Jerusalem and reunited with the rest of the apostolic team, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:22).” This new breath of life made them recipients of regeneration and authorized them to forgive sins, because theirs had been forgiven.

At that time, in the narrative of the Gospel of John, no manifestation became visible. As Christ breathed on his disciples, he took them to the event in which God breathed life into Adam, the first human being, and turning him into a living soul. By interweaving what John says, Jesus contemplated the results that Luke presented from his investigation, such as the events of that first day. Jesus then offers light to the process of salvation and the operation of the Holy Spirit in all its stages: “he opened their mind to that they would understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).”

Understanding and Empowerment

The comprehension and understanding of the scriptures, originated by the power of the Holy Spirit, raised the consciousness of the apostles to understand four important concepts. First, the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the need for the Holy Spirit’s presence was necessary to understand the scriptures. Second, how the relationship with the Holy Spirit would trigger hunger and thirst for more. Third, that the hunger and thirst for more would be satisfied with the second work of grace/baptism in the Holy Spirit. Understanding these concepts would create the potential and provide framing-training for disciples to live in the kingdom that Jesus established with his resurrection.

The day of Pentecost was part of a 50-day festival in Jewish tradition. Jesus spent 40 of the 50 days that remained of the traditional festival with his disciples. The disciples lived the remaining ten days of this festival inspired by a profound faith that came from having received the Holy Spirit. From that day forward, the disciples were empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit, moving forward purposefully to be the faith community God envisioned, carrying out the ministries God called them to do. This is where the second section of John Wesley's transcendental words comes to life: “But as a result of the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, his love for God would be greatly enlarged.”

Progressive Ascending Perfection

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, the second work of grace and baptism, is essential to living the full life that God offers in Christ Jesus. It is the presence, fullness, and glory that sanctifies and perfects the believer to model, as a first-hand witness, the transforming works of the power of God's grace. In an article published by Elevangelista Mexicano[10]author Daniel Bruno distinguishes the term perfection, which can be understood as an absolutely finished product, with the progressive ascending perfection that John Wesley proposed. John Wesley used the Greek concept *teleiosis*, meaning progress that is intelligently planned and directed. It is the attainment of desired ends by the application of intelligent human effort to the means. Bruno proposes that Wesley

[10] “El Concepto de Perfeccion de Wesley 7 la Teologia Pentecostal,” Elevangelista Mexicano, last accessed February 14, 2025, https://elevangelistamexicano.org/2021/09/30/el-concepto-de-perfeccion-de-wesley-y-la-teologia-pentecostal/.

sought to share that *teleiosis* speaks of an ascending progressive sanctification and process of perfection.

William J. Seymour understood the importance of progressive ascending perfection. In 1906, he led the Azusa Street revival, a transcendent and transformative event in American history that has been overlooked and ignored. Seymour, following the teachings of John Wesley, promoted the Holy Spirit's second work of grace and baptism as the grace provided by God to sanctify human beings and enable them to live reconciled with their fellow human beings. In his book *Rivers of Living Water*[11] Richard Foster cites Seymour's work, which overcame the color line, and set forth a challenge of reconciliation before the whole world. Foster believes that while the miracle of glossolalia that occurred during this revival was important, the miracle of interracial unity was the most significant part of the revival.

Teleiosis and Dynamis

Clearly, the Holy Spirit is essential in all stages of the salvation process. The Holy Spirit ministers only through the triune God. God's mystery and sovereignty manages the operation, time, manifestation, and revelation in believers, and believers give themselves permission to listen, thereby developing the attention necessary to believe. When believers understand that they have been called to *teleiosis*[12] and not to a monastic-religious type of sanctification and perfection, they are invited and convinced ascendingly

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[11] Foster, *Streams of Living Water*.

[12] Delling, G. (1964–). τέλος, τελέω, ἐπιτελέω, συντελέω, συντέλεια, παντελής, τέλειος, τελειότης, τελειόω, τελείωσις, τελειωτής. In G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic ed. Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 68.

and progressively by the Holy Spirit to rest in the transforming "*dynamis*" power of God. *Dynamis,*[13] a Greek word for the state of that which is not yet fully realized, also indicates that the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer is consistent and permanent, constant, and persistent. Philippians 1:6 tells us, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it out to completion until the day of Jesus Christ…" Therefore, the Holy Spirit (1) awakens in believers the desire to hear more (prevenient grace), (2) triggers the construction of an avenue that leads to spiritual formation which exposes believers to the experience of justification. Once justified, (3) the grace of God in its multiform wisdom awakens and forms in the believer the desire to know more about how-to live-in justification, beginning to experience the desire to be formed in the image of the perfect person, to be sanctified. By living in the *teleiosis* and *dynamis* of the presence of God operating in believers' lives, believers give themselves permission to become a model of the salvation that God offers in Christ.

Adapting the Spiritual Wisdom Derived from Wesleyan Tradition to Forge a Contemporary Theological Framework

This project explores two final questions. The first is whether the theological wisdom derived from the Wesleyan tradition can be easily adapted to forge a contemporary theological framework that empowers transformative leadership, sanctification, and Holy Spirit theology. This would, then address the exigencies and

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[13] Delling, *Theological Dictionary,* vol. 2, 285.

prospects of the 21st-century church effectively. The final question explores the practical counsel and discernments that might be garnered from Wesleyan theological heritage to guide modern ecclesiastical leaders as they endeavor to implement transformative leadership. These leadership concepts must be anchored in sanctification and Holy Spirit theology and attend to the multifaceted requisites of the evolving 21st-century church community.

The project proposes an affirmative answer. The sanctification theology, the deposit made by the Holy Spirit in the Wesleyan movement, transcends language, can be adapted and conformed to any context, and is an anchor between scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. The project is aimed at returning to the spirit of community life that Christ established with his disciples; a model that gave life and manifested itself in the discipleship process of the Wesleyan movement. Because the Methodist movement has transcended geographical borders and cultures, it proves to be a system that is efficient and effective in spiritual transformation.

Transformative leadership must be informed, sustained, and promoted by the life-changing experiences of the leaders who advocate it. This strongly suggests a movement in which being a disciple is a priority so that as a by-product, making disciples, one individual at a time, is the fruit. Therefore, implementing an efficient and effective discipleship process can, and will, make a significant difference in the church's mission. A discipleship process integrated by the manifold grace of God will operate indivisibly at each stage of the process. This process, in its design and mechanism, works in an interconnected and interdependent manner, interweaving four principles: awaken, form, train, model. Graphically, it would be represented as a quadrilateral where each pillar

stays true to its value, influence, strength, solidity, and self-sustainability. Here, God's "*doron*," or gift, creates synergy, connecting each pillar, which operates and functions at its highest capacity while supporting each principle in the process.

In Wesleyan theology, the manifold grace of God works its purpose in the believer in a synergistic way, preventing, justifying, and sanctifying. The process of discipleship applies the same methodology, through the process of awakening, forming, framing-training, and modeling. Once the discipleship process is implemented, the expectation is that disciples will transform families, communities, and their contexts. The discipleship process will be at the core of who we are and what we do. It is expected that the testimony and lifestyle of each disciple assert the values and principles that are proclaimed in Christ, demonstrating the character, identity and personality of Christ formed in the disciple. This should be the ultimate goal of every discipleship process and ministry strategy.

Wake up (Awakening, "Be")

I believe that the image of God was given and entrusted to every human being from creation, and that this privilege deteriorated with the introduction of sin and the fall from divine grace. The corrosive and degenerative presence of sin has distorted our senses, hearts, and minds. Before our fall, human beings consciously and voluntarily heard, understood, knew, and obeyed God. However, despite our fall, human beings retain the ability to create and choose what is wrong and right within them, because God also gave us free will. That said, we must consider as an immovable principle that everything done strategically and programmatically in our ministry must focus on

collaborating with the Holy Spirit. When we do, the proclamation of the gospel message, through God's grace and wisdom, is efficient and effective. Our objective is to get closer to God and invite all of humanity to use their free will, which will awaken the desire to hear God's message. Once this desire to listen is awakened in the individual, the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ is manifested.

All that is needed is for disciples to be trained and enabled to consciously identify, discern, and perceive that fraction of a second in which they feel, live, and experience God's transforming power. Experiencing God's infinite grace and wisdom through the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives and exerts a phenomenon that the science of neurology helps us to articulate in a practical, scientific, evidentiary way.

Formation (Forming-Framing)

The discipleship process is focused on integrating the application of concepts and practical principles that comprise a comprehensive spiritual formation in believers. The goal is for everyone to understand that they must work on how to appropriate and empower themselves with the new life that Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) purchased and promised for every human being who places their trust and faith in him. This new life demands that disciples consciously and intentionally invest in discovering, developing, and permitting themselves to live according to their new identity, character, and personality. This includes all aspects of their personal and spiritual life so that they may become agents that facilitate transformation in society. Raising believers capable of living up to the full restoration of the image of God, granted in the vicarious victory of Jesus Christ, and achieving spiritual maturity must be intentional (Ephesians 4:10-16).

Here, spiritual maturity involves the recognition of our complete dependence on God and interdependence within the community of faith. It is manifested in the ability to reflect the glory of God through not through our uniformity but through our diversity, style, and expressions of life. Spiritual formation empowers so that everything we say and do is the product of our having been filled with the Holy Spirit. This maturity is the result of a deep immersion and attunement with the Holy Spirit and is characterized by the formation, character, identity and personality aligned with those of Jesus Christ (Galatians 5:22-26; Philippians 4:8- 9; Hebrews 13:20-21; 2 Peter 1:3-13).

Accomplishing these tasks requires understanding the why, how, and purpose of the means of grace and spiritual disciplines. These understandings are not an end in themselves, but rather tools provided by the Holy Spirit to fine-tune our systems, attitudes, and aptitudes in body, mind, and spirit. With this fine tuning, our senses will be sharpened and calibrated, our vision will be clearer, and our hearts will be properly aligned to hear, understand, and obey God's purpose. Once we are able to hear and know the heart of God, we will surrender our will out of love. A heart aligned with God is our most powerful weapon in the daily spiritual battle against our fallen nature and sin. The means of grace and spiritual discipline, in collaboration with the Holy Spirit, form in the believer the ability to create attitudes, habits and lifestyles that glorify God. Ultimately, the process is to awaken, form, and equip believers for the ministerial work to which we have been called in Jesus Christ.

Training (Learning Experience)

We believe that God in Christ Jesus has called us to allow the Holy Spirit to make our lives a mission in which God's vision is a reality: “His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” For us to implement this mission, the comprehensive training of a discipleship process is key, for all believers are expected to lead a life that glorifies God. This enables us to live in the new life creation that God offers us in Jesus Christ. During the training process we walk alongside other worshipers on the journey of exploration and discovery. The training confirms our understanding that we were all called to collaborate with God in establishing his kingdom. We further understand that God entrusted us with his gifts, abilities, and virtues and that the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to use these skills for his glory. Once these are discovered, believers are trained to implement them according to one’s individual capacity, implementing and strengthening our hearts, souls, and minds. In this journey, we work with one another to realize our abilities.

In the context of a transformation strategy, the concept of training can be defined as the process of equipping the disciple in the faith community with the skills, knowledge and competencies necessary to live a life that is a product of faith. This definition implies a practical and results-oriented approach that goes beyond the mere transmission of information. It seeks a substantial transformation of people’s ability and competence, and this can only be achieved through the disciple’s intimate, personal, and shared communion with the Holy Spirit.

From a practical and applicable perspective, nurturing involves several key components. Needs identification takes place before training, and involves identifying the specific skills and knowledge that need to be developed. This can be achieved through

needs or skills assessments. Next, based on identified needs, a training program is designed which covers relevant topics and skills. This program must be structured to ensure that participants can integrate knowledge and skills in a practical way within their individual context.

Interactive methodologies are crucial to training, because it must be participatory, using methods such as workshops, simulations, case studies and group work. These methodologies promote experiential, applicable, transformative, and lived learning that changes the disciple into a first-hand witness of the progressive-ascending power of the transforming God. Training must also focus on competencies that participants can directly apply in their family, civic, work, and ministerial contexts. This includes specific technical skills, soft skills, and leadership competencies.

Evaluation and feedback, using a continuous bottoms-up process, are essential to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of training. This allows adjustments to the process, which helps ensure that learning objectives are being met. And because training does not end at the end of a workshop or course, continuous monitoring and support are necessary to help participants apply what they have learned and to consolidate new skills. Finally, training must be adaptable and reviewed regularly to ensure it remains relevant and effective in a changing environment.

In summary, nurturing in a transformation strategy is a comprehensive, dynamic process that seeks not only to impart knowledge, but also to develop practical skills, encourage the effective application of these skills in real contexts, and promote significant and lasting change in the competencies of the individuals or groups involved.

Model

Modeling in our discipleship process replaces the concept of evangelizing. It starts from the premise that God is already working in every human being; therefore, our call is to listen to God through the context as he calls us to collaborate with what the Holy Spirit is already doing. Because disciples have God's manifold grace and wisdom working in their life, this approach negates the presumption that, as a believer in Christ, we have something that the context does not have.

The call and challenge are to those whose understanding has been enlightened and their senses opened to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, and as disciples, they allow themselves to be used by God. Modeling gives disciples permission to be used by God to awaken, form, and enable the discovery that God, in his manifold grace and wisdom, is working in their lives. Modeling also challenges disciples to live in the simple, humble understanding that "God has not finished with us yet." As unfinished products, we give God permission to model what he has already experienced and achieved in Christ.

Modeling is supported by four indivisible pillars: integrity, fidelity, loyalty, and honesty, resulting in a spiritual, civic, and social life that glorifies God. Modeling is identified as the great commission that Christ Jesus entrusted to his disciples of all ages. The great commission is a set of commandments which are intertwined, indivisible, and inseparable.

Conclusion

In concluding this theological foundation paper for my doctoral program, it became evident that the challenge of cultivating transformative leadership within the 21st-century church was deeply intertwined with our understanding and application of sanctification and discipleship within the Wesleyan tradition. The exploration of this tradition, particularly through the lenses of John and Charles Wesley's expositions, has revealed the intricate relationship between doctrinal understanding and practical application in ministerial contexts.

The Wesleyan framework, with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification, offers a rich tapestry for understanding the complex dynamics of spiritual transformation. It underscores the necessity of a holistic approach to discipleship, one that transcends mere theological assent and permeates every aspect of personal and communal life. This approach, rooted in the triune interaction of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, provides a robust theological foundation for developing ministerial strategies that are both spiritually nourishing and practically effective.

Furthermore, the incorporation of neuroscientific insights into this theological framework will provide a unique perspective on how spiritual transformation can be understood and facilitated in contemporary contexts. The concepts of neuroplasticity and neurotheology bring to light the profound ways in which our spiritual practices, grounded in Wesleyan theology, can have tangible effects on our mental and emotional well-being, enhancing our capacity for transformative leadership.

As I moved forward in my ministerial journey, the insights gleaned from this exploration informed the development of discipleship programs that are not only theologically sound but also responsive to the needs and challenges of modern congregations. The ultimate aim of this work is to foster a community of believers who are deeply rooted in their faith, equipped with practical skills for ministry, and actively engaged in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. The Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification as a process of continual growth and the Holy Spirit's active role in this journey offers a hopeful and dynamic vision for the church's future. By embracing this vision, we can cultivate communities that reflect the fullness of God's grace, embodying the love, holiness, and power of the gospel in a way that resonates deeply with the contemporary world.

In essence, this theological exploration reaffirms the timeless relevance of Wesleyan principles while also highlighting the need for their contextual application in today’s ecclesiastical landscape. It is a call to embrace our heritage while boldly stepping into the future, confident in the Holy Spirit’s guidance and the transformative power of God’s grace at work within and through us.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

John Wesley regarded sanctification as a divine trust delegated to the Methodist movement by the Holy Spirit. According to Wesleyan tradition and ethos, sanctification is neither a static state nor a monastic retreat; instead, it is a lived experience that cannot be systematically taught. It is expected to arise from a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. This experience aligns and invites the believer to participate in a process of discipleship oriented toward a holistic, integral, communal, and replicable holiness.

This chapter explores the interdisciplinary dialogue between the theology of sanctification, spiritual formation, and cognitive science, specifically, neuroplasticity, as it applies to Wesleyan tradition and ethos. We understand that the organic and progressive outcome of such a conversation can directly address the challenges hindering the growth and multiplication of our faith communities. The effort to change our behavior without inner transformation is precisely what we see in the lamentable superficiality of Western Christianity and the notorious failures of Christian leaders. Dallas Willard aptly describes this challenge: "As we first turned away from God in our thoughts, so it is in our thoughts that the first movements toward the renovation of the heart occur."[1]

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[1] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ - 20th Anniversary Edition*, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021) https://a.co/8jCO27u.

Neuroplasticity, defined as the brain's ability to reorganize its structure, functions, and connections in response to experiences, learning, or environmental changes, has been recognized as a key phenomenon in understanding the human brain. Dr. Santiago Ramón y Cajal shares in one of his books: "Every human being, if he sets his mind to it, can be a sculptor of his own brain."[2] Dr. Cajal was a pioneer in proposing that the brain possesses a continuous capacity for transformation and permanent regeneration. Similarly, the church, as a living organism, holds specific information within its spiritual DNA that can be awakened, nurtured, trained, and prepared to model God's transformative power in their lives, enabling them to live in social holiness and effectively transform their contexts.

Dr. Caroline Leaf, in her book *Switch on Your Brain*, establishes a connection between neuroplasticity and the biblical message of Romans 12:2, where the apostle Paul calls for the renewal of the mind. In the article "The Plastic Human Cerebral Cortex" authored by a team of neuroscientists—Álvaro Pascual-Leone, Amir Amedi, Felipe Fregni, and Lotfi B. Merabet—from the Center for Noninvasive Brain Stimulation, Harvard Medical School, the authors describe plasticity as an intrinsic property of the human brain, emphasizing its evolutionary significance as a mechanism that enables the nervous system to transcend the constraints of its genetic blueprint. This capacity for adaptation allows the brain to respond effectively to environmental pressures, physiological changes, and lived experiences. Such insights highlight the dynamic and transformative nature of neuroplasticity, underpinning its role in the brain's ability to

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[2] Marian Rojas Estapé. *Cómo hacer que te pasen cosas buenas: Entiende tu cerebro, gestiona tus emociones, mejora tu vida* (Crecimiento personal), Kindle Edition. (Barcelona, Spain: Espasa, 2018), https://a.co/1rwutn6.

reorganize and optimize its structure and functions throughout life.[3] Thus, the conversation between neuroplasticity and sanctification finds common ground in their transformative character: sanctification, led by the Holy Spirit, guides the believer toward perfection in love and constant transformation in Christ, in a lifelong journey of faith.

Additionally, this chapter presents the interaction between spiritual formation, mediated by spiritual disciplines and means of grace, as practical tools that facilitate lasting change and transformation. These principles are supported by the findings of Dr. Ana Ibáñez, whose book *Surprise Your Mind: Train Your Brain and Unlock the Power to Transform Your Life*,[4] is quoted in a conference sponsored by "Aprendamos Juntos."[5] Dr. Ibáñez offers neuroscientific strategies to overcome obstacles such as stress, anxiety, and lack of focus, thereby enhancing self-esteem and emotional regulation. Similarly, Dr. Caroline Leaf describes a process of mental detoxification, and the deliberate construction of new habits based on activating previously unexplored areas of the brain.

Finally, Dr. Nazareth Castellanos adds an essential component to the interdisciplinary dialogue by emphasizing the innate spirituality of human beings[6]—a concept explored by Dr. Andrew Newberg in his studies on neurotheology, which examine the intersection of spiritual experience and neurological processes. According to

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[3] A. Pascual-Leone et al, "The plastic human cerebral cortex," Annual *Review of Neuroscience*, 28, 377–401, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.neuro.27.070203.144216

[4] Ana Ibáñez. *Sorprende a tu mente (Edición mexicana): Entrena tu cerebro y descubre el poder de transformar tu vida*, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2024), https://a.co/6BaAG64.

[5] _____ "V. Completa. Cómo entrenar tu cerebro para vivir mejor., entrenadora cerebral," BBVA Aprendamos Juntos Agenda 2030, May 2024, YouTube Video, 55:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-Xg-OLBS0o.

[6] Nazareth Castellanos, "X Foro de Espiritualidad," Universidad Popular de Logroño, 2022, YouTube video, 1:07:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oSCGVtCClw.

Newburg and Waldman, "The underlying mechanics of meditation are theologically neutral, it can be integrated with any religious doctrine or creed or used in schools to improve social cooperation and cognitive performance."[7] Together, these perspectives illustrate how spirituality, neuroplasticity, and the process of sanctification work in concert to achieve comprehensive transformation in individuals. This approach affirms a collaborative process that facilitates the integral transformation of individuals.

Thesis

As stated earlier in this project, the lack of transformational leadership in the 21st-century church and its disconnect from its cultural and social context can be attributed to two primary causes. First is the absence of a creative, innovative, and adaptable ministry model capable of holistically addressing spiritual and contextual needs. Second is the inability to strategically disciple believers within a theological framework that clearly articulates salvation, sanctification, and the continuous transformation of believers as instruments of contextual change. Finally, there is a lack of integration of interdisciplinary knowledge that validates, reinforces, and contextualizes biblical truths as a relevant and applicable message for contemporary times. This project proposed an interdisciplinary approach where neuroplasticity, as the brain's ability to reorganize and adapt, parallels the spiritual process of sanctification, providing a contemporary framework for discipleship and transformational ministry leadership.

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[7] Andrew Newberg M.D. and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*, Kindle Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), https://a.co/4qMwGqO.

Hypothesis

The process of transformation promised by God through salvation in Christ Jesus is holistic and continuous, naturally correlating with the principles of neuroplasticity. Scripture describes this transformation as sanctification, in which God collaborates with believers to renew their minds and profoundly transform their lives, enabling disciples to embrace relevant and transformational leadership principles. In 2007, writing in *Time* Magazine, journalist Sharon Begley supports this hypothesis:

> Research in recent years has overthrown dogma. What dogma? The doctrine of the immutable human brain. In its place has come the revelation that the adult brain retains impressive powers of "neuroplasticity" - the ability to change its structure and function in response to experience.[8]

Neuroplasticity, then, provides a scientific basis for understanding how spiritual disciplines and means of grace reconfigure patterns of thought and behavior. In this context, Romans 12:2, which calls for the renewal of the mind, and Hebrews 4:12, which highlights the life-giving action of God's word, are interpreted as biblical manifestations of a process that encompasses both the spiritual and the neurological.

This approach proposes that the interaction between theology and neuroscience not only enriches the understanding of sanctification but also provides practical tools for discipleship and ministry leadership. By integrating both disciplines, a transformative framework is established. This framework prepares believers to lead faith communities toward significant spiritual and contextual renewal.

Neuroplasticity in Biblical Foundations

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[8] Sharon Begley, "The Brain: How the Brain Rewires Itself," *Time Magazine,* last accessed February 14, 2025, https://palousemindfulness.com/docs/brain-rewires.pdf.

The biblical foundation of this project is found in Acts 19:1–7, highlighting the need for transformation in the spirit of the mind—a theme central to both neuroplasticity and the theology of sanctification. In these verses, the apostle Paul encounters a ministry context in Ephesus that demands a radical shift in his approach and preaching methods. This transformation is not merely pragmatic but spiritual, reflecting how the renewal of the mind becomes a prerequisite for aligning with the Holy Spirit's purpose.

Dallas Willard, in *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, provides a simple yet profound and applicable definition of spiritual formation: "Spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one is moved and remade from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom."[9] Similarly, Paul shares with the Corinthians the personal impact of this transformative process: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations… He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Paul, known for his Pharisaic zeal and habitual ministry patterns—such as avoiding preaching in previously evangelized territories, debating with Jews in synagogues, and emphatically proclaiming the message of the cross as his primary teaching, was led to a transformative experience before effectively ministering in Ephesus. In this region, the missional context had already been prepared: Apollos and disciples of John the Baptist had sown the gospel message, and the faith community had begun to take shape (Acts 18:24–26). However, for Paul to engage fully with this

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[9] Willard, *Renovation of the Heart, Putting on the Character of Christ - 20th Anniversary Edition*, Kindle Edition (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021), last accessed February 14, 2025, https://a.co/i8N4FKr.

dynamic, it was necessary for him to abandon his "automatic" ministry patterns and adopt a new approach designed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6–10).

The narrative in Acts 16:9–10 illustrates how Paul and his team were guided by visions and spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, and vigils. These practices were not only a means of grace but also tools for reprogramming and rewiring their spiritual mindset, synchronizing them with the divine plan. This process mirrors neuroplasticity, involving profound transformation in the spiritual and strategic structure of their minds, aligning with the Holy Spirit's purpose and breaking reactive or automatic patterns in their mission.

The Context of Ephesus and Paul's Transformation

The ministry in Ephesus was both strategic and transformative, as this city would become a pivotal point for the expansion of the gospel into Europe. However, the cultural and religious context of the region required a new and flexible approach. Acts 16:13–15 describes Paul interacting with women—an unusual occurrence for a Pharisee, especially considering that some of these women, such as Lydia, were businesswomen and Gentiles. This shift in focus demonstrates how the Holy Spirit prepared Paul to adapt to the needs of the context, overcoming his previous tendencies. In Acts 19:2, Paul first listens to the spiritual needs of the disciples in Ephesus rather than immediately proclaiming the gospel, as was his habit. This act of listening reveals a transformation in his ministerial approach, allowing his proclamation of the gospel to be more relevant and effective in that context. This change aligns with the concept of neuroplasticity: a transformation that results from lived experience and reconfigures mental and spiritual connections.

The Renewal of the Mind and Divine Purpose

The transformation of the "spirit of the mind" not only impacted Paul but also involved his ministry team. Through a life of prayer and spiritual disciplines, they collectively discerned the Holy Spirit's purpose, reaching an entirely new missional dimension. This process was not merely a human strategy but an integral renewal that prepared them for deeper ministry aligned with the Holy Spirit's work.

Theologically, this narrative highlights the intersection between neuroplasticity and the theology of sanctification: the renewal of the mind is both a divine act and a human response, facilitated by means of grace and spiritual practices. This model is not only applicable to Paul's mission but also serves as an invitation for the contemporary church to embrace constant renewal as a pathway to missional effectiveness and holistic sanctity.

The Historical Figure: Susanna Wesley

Susanna Wesley is often recognized as "the intellect behind the Wesleyan movement." Susanna was chosen for her courage, determination, and exceptional ability to design and shape the souls, spirits, and minds of the children who lived beyond infancy. Susanna Wesley stands as a model of spiritual formation, academic learning, and sanctification and as a living example of how neuroplasticity can be applied in contexts of human development and integral transformation.

From her childhood, Susanna cultivated a life marked by academic and spiritual learning. This preparation not only strengthened her as a woman in an era averse to female leadership but also made her a remarkable teacher and character shaper of her children. Her legacy was solidified as she imparted values of integrity, resilience, and spirituality, enabling several of her children, including John and Charles Wesley, to become foundational pillars of the Methodist revival. Susanna's ability to deeply influence her children's lives parallels the principles of neuroplasticity: the transformation of human beings through lived experiences, continuous learning, and disciplined practices.

Susanna Wesley's Methodology: A Model of Integral Transformation

Susanna Wesley's educational and formative approach rivals the modern methods proposed by scientists such as Dr. Ana Ibáñez, an expert in cognitive training, and psychiatrist Marian Rojas Estapé. These professionals have had the privilege of developing their skills in favorable contexts supported by academic and social systems

that value science and innovation. In contrast, Susanna Wesley operated in a patriarchal environment that limited opportunities for women. Despite these barriers, she developed an integral formation model that remains relevant today.

Susanna implemented daily practices of teaching, discipline, and spiritual devotion. Each of her children received individualized education for one hour a day, in addition to participating in Bible studies and moments of spiritual reflection. This methodology not only fostered academic learning but also strengthened emotional and spiritual connections within the family, creating an environment where values and faith were effectively transmitted. Neuro-scientifically, these practices can be viewed as tools that shape and strengthen neural connections, facilitating the development of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual skills.

Parallels Between Neuroplasticity, Sanctification, and Transformation

Susanna Wesley's life and work reflect a profound understanding of sanctification as a dynamic and transformative process. Her dedication to shaping her children aligns with the concept of neuroplasticity: the brain's ability to reorganize and adapt in response to experiences, learning, and discipline. Like neuroplasticity, sanctification involves ongoing change, shaping not only character but also the mind and spirit.

Susanna did not merely shape her children's character through teaching but also equipped them with practical tools to face life's challenges. She built an organic community of progressive trust and accountability. Her ability to develop resilience in her children can be compared to the processes described by Dr. Caroline Leaf in *Switch on Your Brain*, where the author explains how conscious practices can activate dormant

areas of the brain and promote holistic development. Dr. Leaf quote the findings of other neuroscientists, some of whom have shown that our thoughts have a remarkable power to transform our minds.[10] In in this book, and in response to her findings, Dr. Leaf shares a detox system, "The 21-Day Brain Detox Plan."[11] Similarly, Marian Rojas Estapé, in "Encuentra tu Persona Vitamina" (*Find Your Vitamin Person)*, highlights the importance of emotional bonds and consistent practices in transforming thought and behavioral patterns in community: "The famous emotional intelligence, empathy and connecting with the emotions and feelings of others in my opinion are the keys to success in social, couple or family life."[12] These modern approaches find a historical counterpart in Susanna Wesley's strategies, which, though not identified as neuroscientific in her time, clearly transformed the minds and hearts of her children.

A Transformative Legacy

Susanna Wesley's work as a sculptor of her children's character and personality stands out as an example of spiritual and moral formation and as a testament to resilience in an adverse cultural context. Susanna demonstrated that human transformation requires discipline, intentionality, and a clear sense of purpose. In this regard, her life embodies the essence of sanctification, the application of spiritual principles, and the human capacity for continuous change—elements also supported by modern neuroscience.

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[10] Dr. Caroline Leaf. *Enciende tu cerebro: La clave para la felicidad, la manera de pensar y la salud*, Kindle edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group), 2017), https://a.co/9dIQwqW.

[11] Leaf, *Enciende tu cerebro.*

[12] Marian Rojas Estapé. *Encuentra tu persona vitamina (Espasa Crecimiento personal)*, Kindle edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Barcelona, Spain: Espasa, 2018), https://a.co/5A5kjOI.

In summary, Susanna Wesley was much more than the mother of John and Charles Wesley. She was a visionary who understood how spiritual disciplines, education, and integral formation could transform lives. Her model, though developed in a different historical context, remains an inspiration for applying the principles of neuroplasticity, sanctification, and transformation to contemporary humanity.

Neuroplasticity Applied Through Human *Gnosis*: A Scientific and Spiritual Perspective

The Legacy of the Enlightenment and Cartesian Dualism

The Enlightenment introduced an excessively rational approach that deeply influenced European theology, promoting a divorce between mind and emotions, reason and body. This separation finds its roots in René Descartes' famous premise, "I think, therefore I am," which positioned the mind as the center of knowledge, stripping it of its intrinsic connection to the body and heart. This dichotomy was incorporated into the theology of the era, resulting in a fragmented approach to humanity that ignored the complexity of its integral design.

However, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his influential work *Descartes' Error*, challenges this Cartesian dualism by demonstrating that emotions are essential for rationality. According to Damasio, the human brain operates through a complex network of interactions among multiple systems, from prefrontal cortices to the brainstem. This network includes regions responsible for emotions, which are fundamental to decision-making and reasoning. Damasio asserts that the Cartesian idea of a purely cerebral and

disconnected reason is not only limited but erroneous: “I propose that human reason depends on several brain systems, working in concert across many levels of neuronal organization, rather than on a single brain center."[13] This holistic approach contrasts with the reductionist premises of the Enlightenment and builds a bridge toward a more integrated vision of humanity.

The History of Mindfulness: “Complete Attention”

Neuroplasticity, as discovered through cognitive science, and meditation (mindfulness) offer substantial and measurable benefits for improving human quality of life. Dr. Arturo Torres, in his article “The History of Full Attention: How It Developed from Meditation,” points out that the foundations of mindfulness history have their origins in vipassana meditation, a comprehensive practice of religious rituals performed in various Asian regions, particularly near India. Mindfulness is related to a broader philosophical doctrine encompassing meditation in a general sense. This phenomenon emerged alongside Buddhism approximately 3,500 years ago. The philosophical basis of what would eventually be known as mindfulness was understood in the Buddhist context as *sati*, considered one of the essential elements on the path to enlightenment and liberation. In fact, *sati* translates as “full awareness,” a term that, in English, corresponds to “mindfulness.”[14]

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[13] Antonio R. Damasio. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Kindle Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (New York: Penguin Group, 1994), https://a.co/ditQU9Z.

[14] Arturo Torres, “La Historia del Mindfulness: Así se Desarrolló a Partir de la Meditación,” *Psicología y Mente* (May 3rd, 2018) last accessed February 14, 2025, https://psicologiaymente.com/meditacion/historia-del-mindfulness.

Contemporary Contributions

Dr. Nazareth Castellanos expands Damasio's critiques from a contemporary perspective, providing empirical evidence that reaffirms the interconnection between mind, body, and emotions. Castellanos argues that the brain does not function in isolation but interacts deeply with the heart and other organs to form thoughts, emotions, and habits. In her research, Castellanos proposes the existence of seven human senses, instead of the traditional five. These additional senses, related to internal and emotional perception, play a crucial role in shaping human thought and behavior.[15] This integration of sensory and emotional systems reinforces the idea that emotions are not peripheral but central to the human experience. Castellanos emphasizes how practices such as mindfulness can synchronize the mind and body, fostering neuroplasticity and generating significant changes in emotional and cognitive well-being. This finding is especially relevant when considering how mindfulness practices can reconfigure neural patterns and encourage positive habits.

Neurological Synchronization and the Potential of Mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness can be problematic if we tie the concept to a particular religious or spiritual expression. However, as a part of rigorous multidimensional spiritual discipline, it can be a useful tool which invites us to search for our inner voice. With our strength and intellect, we have access to that voice, but not

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[15] Nazareth Castellanos, interview by Alejandra Martins BBC News Mundo, "Tenemos 7 sentidos, y los 5 más conocidos son los menos importantes," February 8, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-64416545.

completely. Mindfulness meditation, as described by Mario Alonso Puig, is a fascinating journey into oneself, surpassing the limits of our individual identities. This practice is not about seeking a logical or intellectual understanding of events but rather about immersing oneself in an experience, embracing our inner capabilities and potential. Striving for a particular outcome in mindfulness meditation can be detrimental to the process. Ideally, it will encourage us to release our need for control and our desire for intellectual understanding of each event. Mindfulness meditation is essentially an invitation to trust and flow with an inner wisdom that challenges the narrow understanding of our restricted identities. It serves as a journey to expand our personal views, encouraging self-improvement and growth, guiding us from the seemingly rational to the realm of the truly possible.[16]

Mindfulness, known as *sati* in its Buddhist origin, is an ancient practice emphasizing full attention and conscious connection to the present. This approach has been scientifically validated by neuroscientists such as Dr. Richard J. Davidson, who has demonstrated that mindfulness induces changes in brain structure and function. These practices strengthen neural connectivity in regions associated with attention, emotional regulation, and resilience (Davidson & Begley, 2012).

Dr. Mario Alonso Puig, in his books and conferences, provides clinical examples where mindfulness was used as a pre- and post-operative tool to improve patients' emotional and physical states. According to Puig, synchronization between the mind, heart, and body achieved through meditation and similar disciplines significantly

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[16] Mario Alonso Puig, "Meditación Mindfulness," February 2023, YouTube Video, 12:55, https://www.youtube.com/@MarioAlonsoPuigOficial

contributes to recovery and overall well-being. These discoveries highlight humanity's ability to be both scientifically and spiritually neutral, to reorganize and synchronize its nervous systems to improve quality of life. Through mindfulness and neuroplasticity, individuals can alter patterns of thought and behavior, fostering healthier habits and greater emotional resilience.[17]

A Confrontation Between Neutral Theology and Enlightenment Theology

Why is it relevant to explore neuroplasticity and neurological synchronization in the context of neutral theology? Because much of the theology inherited from the Enlightenment was constructed on the fragmented foundations of Cartesian dualism, ignoring the interdependence of mind, body, and spirit. In today's era, where the rigidity of Enlightenment absolutes is being deconstructed by postmodern thought, it is essential to rethink these premises from an integrative perspective.

Modern neuroscience invites us to reconsider how theology addresses humanity. If reason and emotions are inseparable, as Damasio and Castellanos assert, then spirituality and sanctification must be integrated to encompass the totality of human existence. This challenges theological notions that separate the spirit from the body and proposes a vision where spiritual disciplines transform not only the soul but also the brain and body.

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[17] Puig, . "Mario Alonso Puig y la Meditacion antes de una Cirugia," BBVA Aprendamos Juntos 2030, March 2024,YouTube video, 1:35:24, https://www.google.com/search?q=mario+alonso+puig+y+la+meditacion+antes+de+una+cirugia&rlz=1C5OZZY_enUS1128US1128&oq=mario+alonso+puig+y+la+meditacion+antes+de+una+cirugia&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRiPAjIHCAMQIRiPAtIBCTIyNjk5ajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:17e0a981,vid:c3VdDqNeDu8,st:0.

Conclusion

Neuroplasticity and mindfulness demonstrate humanity's inherent capacity to reorganize and neurologically synchronize itself, promoting well-being and personal transformation. However, these capacities, while impressive, are limited in their scope. True transformation, as described in Christian theology, comes from the power of God operating through faith in Christ. This confrontation between what humanity can achieve through its own means and what God accomplishes in humanity underscores the need for an integrative theology that recognizes both human achievements and the supreme work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, celebrating the greatness of God's transformative power.

The Transformation of the Human Being:

A Reconciliation Between Scientific *Gnosis* and Divine Epignosis

This section of the document explores the convergence of neuroscience, mindfulness as a theologically neutral practice, and Christian theology, in the context of the Wesleyan approach to sanctification. Recognizing the human capacity for neurological and emotional synchronization, it is argued that this capacity, while affected by the Fall, persists as a reflection of God's image. I contend that this capacity reaches its fullness only through the vivifying breath of the Holy Spirit, revealed in scripture as the transformative power that raised Christ from the dead (Romans 6:22).

The More Excellent Way: A Superior Transformation

While practices like mindfulness offer valuable tools for neurologically synchronizing human systems, these systems operate within the limits of human *gnosis*, that is, knowledge achieved through individual effort. The apostle Paul, however, introduces a transformational dimension that surpasses these capacities: “And yet I will show you a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). Spiritual transformation, described in the Bible as sanctification, transcends human capability. It is the result of epignosis, or knowledge revealed by God, and the work of the surpassing greatness of divine power that raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19–20). This power, operating in believers through faith, not only renews the mind but also holistically transforms the individual, synchronizing body and spirit in perfect harmony with divine will.

Advances in Neuroscience and Human Gnosis

Modern neuroscience has illuminated the brain’s ability to adapt and reorganize itself. Dr. Nazareth Castellanos, in *Neuroscience of the Body*, emphasizes that practices such as meditation and conscious breathing generate structural changes in the brain, including the strengthening of the prefrontal cortex and the reduction of amygdala activity, promoting better emotional control and stress reduction. She says that it only takes five days to start contemplating the changes: “It has been observed that, five days after starting to practice meditation daily, this area activates its neuronal growth, two weeks later there has been a significant anatomical and functional increase.”[18] Similarly,

[18] Nazareth Castellanos, *La Neurociencia del Cuerpo*, 150-155.

Dr. Marian Rojas Estapé, in *How to Make Good Things Happen*, details how the 4-7-8 breathing method—inhaling for 4 seconds, holding the breath for 7 seconds, and exhaling for 8—activates the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting calm and reducing levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.[19] Dr. Ana Ibáñez highlights that conscious breathing is "the fastest way to signal the brain that we are calm." According to Ibáñez, these practices foster synchronization between mind and body, facilitating emotional resilience and holistic well-being (Aprendemos Juntos, 2020).

Limitations of Human Gnosis

While neuroplasticity and mindfulness provide valuable tools, they reflect the limitations of gnostic human knowledge derived from natural revelation. In this context, it is important to clarify a key distinction. As Dr. Justo L. González explains in *The History of Christianity Vol 1*, *gnosis* is a gift of God's common grace, enabling humanity to progress in knowledge and understanding. However, González also emphasizes that *gnosis*, by itself, is insufficient to address or overcome the effects of the Fall.

Thus, this discussion firmly distances itself from the syncretistic and heterodox theology of Gnosticism, which historically distorted Christian doctrine by rejecting foundational tenets of the faith. The approach detailed here begins with the affirmation of orthodox Christian beliefs, including the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, his fully human and fully divine nature, and the declaration that God is the creator of all things (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). These foundational truths underscore that human knowledge, while

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[19] Marian Rojas Estapé, *Cómo hacer que te pasen cosas buenas: Entiende tu cerebro, gestiona tus emociones, mejora tu vida*, Kindle Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Barcelona, Spain: Espasa, 2018), https://a.co/ez8eQns.

valuable and reflective of God's common grace, must ultimately be illuminated and redeemed by divine revelation, or epignosis. This theological framework enables us to embrace the contributions of *gnosis*, such as those offered through advancements in neuroscience and psychology, while remaining rooted in the transformative power of epignosis, which flows uniquely from God through the Holy Spirit. It is this revealed knowledge that renews, redeems, and sanctifies, transcending the limitations of human discovery and pointing us to the ultimate source of all truth: God Himself.[20]

Epignosis: Transformation Through the Holy Spirit

In John 20:22, the resurrected Jesus breathes on his disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This event recalls Genesis 2:7, where God breathes life into Adam, but in the New Testament context, it symbolizes spiritual regeneration and the inauguration of a new creation. From fallen Adam, we inherit *gnosis*; from the new Adam, Christ Jesus, we inherit a vivifying spirit, the renewal of our mind, and its sustaining spirit. Luke 24:45 states, "Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." This act demonstrates the Holy Spirit's ability to illuminate the human mind, surpassing the limits of *gnosis*. Dallas Willard describes this illumination as an essential component of spiritual formation, aligning the believer's thoughts and actions with divine will, stating, "It is a vision that has to be given to humanity by God himself, in a revelation suited to our condition. We cannot clearly see it on our own."[21] Romans 6:22 affirms that

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[20] Justo L. González, *Historia del cristianismo: Tomo 1* (Miami, FL: Editorial Unilit, 2003), 78-80.

[21] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ - 20th Anniversary Edition*, Kindle Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021) https://a.co/i8N4FKr.

sanctification is the fruit of the believer's liberation from sin: "But now that you have been set free from sin... the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."

Discipleship Process: Integrated with Neuroplasticity, Mindfulness, Means of Grace, and Sanctification in the Wesleyan Ethos

Introduction to the Discipleship Process

Human beings live in a state of constant spiritual formation that drives our transformative processes. Dr. Dallas Willard defined spiritual formation this way:

> Spiritual formation, without regard to any specifically religious context or tradition, is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite "form" or character. It is a process that happens to everyone.[22]

However, a fundamental question must guide this reality: What spirituality are we following, and where does the process we have adopted lead us?

As Christians, the ultimate goal of spiritual formation is to transform our inner being into the image of Jesus Christ. This foundational calling underpins all ministry and ministers, as highlighted in Ephesians 4:7–16. Since our inner being is continually undergoing transformation and renewal, its capacity to reflect God's glory progressively increases. This process, inherently nonlinear, creates space for a life lived in grace and active collaboration with the Holy Spirit.

Our discipleship process is an intentional response from every believer who has understood their calling to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in forming the character,

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[22] Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*.

identity, and personality of Jesus Christ in their lives. This collaboration is the supreme goal of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Again, quoting Dallas Willard, "Because we are active participants in the process and what we do or do not make a huge difference, our efforts must be based on understanding."[23] Spiritual formation represents the belief that the Holy Spirit uniquely applies the surpassing greatness of God's power, the same power that raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19–20), in the life of every believer. This power holistically transforms the spirit, soul, and body, synchronizing them with God's will.

The Exclusivity of Spiritual Transformation

Why is this transformation exclusively God's work? Based on an interpretation of Dr. Willard's videos, it seems to be because the synchronization, alignment, and integral transformation of the human being can only be accomplished by the one who designed and created us in his image and likeness. This transformation is not merely a change in behavior but a profound renewal that conforms us to Christ. Scripture teaches that we were created with an innate capacity to love and obey God. However, with the entry of sin, we learned the opposite patterns of constant rebellion against God and his will. God's call in Christ Jesus is to awaken, shape, and equip us to live in the fullness of his will. This discipleship and spiritual formation process is both a privilege and a responsibility, where every believer becomes an instrument of God's transformative power.

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[23] Willard. *Renovation of the Heart*.

Spiritual Formation: A Tool for Sanctification

Since we are called to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in our experience of sanctification, spiritual formation is elevated as the primary source of transformation from which the journey of faith flows. Believers must live and testify to this journey as the fruit of their salvation. The experience of what John Wesley called a "heart strangely warmed" is essential to ignite in believers the epignosis of God, leading them to contemplate and live a journey of sanctification and dedication to God's mission.

The Wesleyan Perspective: Sanctification as Central Mission

John Wesley affirmed that the Methodist movement had received a special depositum[24] from the Holy Spirit, encapsulated in the doctrine of sanctification or Christian perfection. Wesley viewed this teaching not as a secondary aspect of the Christian faith but as the central emphasis that defined the mission and purpose of Methodism. According to Wesley, "Christian perfection is the privilege of being made perfect in love in this life, being transformed by God's grace into the likeness of Christ." Wesley emphasized that sanctification did not imply absolute sinlessness but referred to a heart fully oriented toward love for God and neighbor. In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley declared:

> This is what I regard as the peculiar doctrine entrusted to us as a people: Christian perfection. This was not emphasized (if at all) by our reformers; so much so that in reviving this doctrine, we are recovering a great truth that had been long buried and almost entirely lost.

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[24] Kevin Watson, *Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification—the Lost Power of the Methodist Movement*, Kindle edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2021), chap.1, loc. 350, https://www.amazon.com/Perfect-Love-Recovering-Sanctification-Methodist-ebook/dp/B09575NT38.

For Wesley, this deposit of the Holy Spirit involved not only proclaiming the doctrine of sanctification but also living it out in practice, promoting a life of personal and social holiness. Sanctification is, therefore, a model of continuous transformation across all contexts of life, rejecting legalistic approaches and focusing on personal commitment to God.

Community as the Context of Transformation

Transformation is lived and modeled within the community. Jesus Christ himself is our model: he lived and ministered with the support of a community that shared his mission. Similarly, discipleship and spiritual formation are experienced in a communal context where believers grow together as catalysts for transformation. The Trinity offers us a model of perfect communion, and as disciples, we are called to reflect this unity and collaboration in our faith communities.

By adopting this approach of revolutionary change, our discipleship process becomes a living testimony of God's transformative power. Every believer is called to abandon conformity to the world, as taught in Romans 12:2 and 1 Peter 1:12-25, and to live convinced that God has not finished his work in us. For this reason, passages such as 2 Corinthians 12:9–11 inspire us to model God's grace in our lives with gratitude. Spiritual formation is not an end in itself, but the means by which the Holy Spirit guides us toward integral and progressive transformation in Christ Jesus. This process allows us to experience sanctification, model its impact, and testify to its effects in our lives and communities. In this way, discipleship becomes a pathway of continuous renewal,

molding us into the image of Christ for the glory of God and the expansion of his kingdom.

Integrating the Discipleship Process

The discipleship process serves as an intentional response to God's transformative call, aligning with the Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification and spiritual formation. It operates within a cyclical-linear dynamic: reflecting life's repetitive stages while progressing toward God's redemptive purpose. By integrating concepts of neuroplasticity, mindfulness, the means of grace, and sanctification, the process fosters comprehensive spiritual growth and transformation, consistent with Wesleyan theology and praxis.

Awakening: A Call to Awareness

As stated earlier, this initial stage is marked by a profound recognition of God's grace. As the disciple encounters God, their mind and heart begin to realign with divine purposes. Neuroplasticity underscores how openness to grace and biblical teachings rewire thought patterns, establishing pathways of faith, hope, and love. At this stage, the means of grace—prayer, scripture reading, and sacraments—become vital, opening the heart to God's transformative work. This awakening is not merely an intellectual realization but a foundational reconfiguration of the self, preparing the disciple for a life of sanctification.

Formation: Strengthening and Growth

Formation involves sustained spiritual education and development. Mindfulness, paired with engagement in the means of grace, sharpens the disciple's ability to remain focused on God's presence. Wesleyan sanctification views this phase as the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, refining the believer's mind and character. By intentionally and continually integrating practices such as worship, biblical meditation, and fellowship, the disciple creates foundational mental states and structures which support the reshaping of the brain. This process is conducive to internalizing Christ's teachings, moving toward perfection in love.

Equipping-Training (Learning Experience): Tools for Ministry

Hebrews 13:21 emphasizes God's work in equipping believers for service. In this stage, neuroplasticity reveals how repetitive acts of service, scriptural reflection, and prayer reinforce neural pathways that align with Christlike behaviors. Equipping is more than instruction; it fosters transformation, enabling the disciple to develop new positive habits and skills that model love and justice. In Wesleyan practice, equipping begins with working with your God-given gifts and virtues. Further, participation in fasting, acts of mercy, and active service, embed the values of sanctification further into the disciple's life.

Modeling (Missional-Evangelist): Reflecting Christ

The final stage represents the external manifestation of internal transformation. The disciple models Christ's character in all aspects of life, demonstrating love,

resilience, and holiness. Mindfulness and consistent participation in the means of grace enable the disciple to remain centered amid challenges. Just as neuroplasticity allows the brain to adapt, the disciple learns to respond to complex situations with Christlike compassion. This stage culminates in social holiness, a hallmark of Wesleyan sanctification, where the disciple reflects God's kingdom on earth. The disciple then shares the gospel not out of a need to proselytize or evangelize, but out of the love of Christ Jesus at work in her or his life.

Being and Doing in the Context of Wesleyan Sanctification

Unlike cultural paradigms that prioritize doing to justify being, discipleship in Christ reverses the sequence: God transforms believers to be—children of God, justified by grace—and from that identity calls them to do (Romans 6:22; Ephesians 2:8-10). Wesleyan sanctification emphasizes a lifelong journey where the Holy Spirit molds the believer's identity, enabling them to live out divine love in every aspect of life. Neuroplasticity complements this theology by illustrating how spiritual practices—prayer, meditation, and communal worship—reinforce new neural pathways, sustaining growth in Christlikeness. Mindfulness, as practiced within spiritual disciplines, anchors believers in their identity in Christ, bridging the gap between being and doing. This integrative approach fosters ongoing transformation, aligning the believer's life with God's will.

Defining an Integrated Disciple

Integrated disciples respond to God's grace, allowing divine love to initiate their transformation. They develop Christlike thought patterns through spiritual neuroplasticity, reconfiguring their mind toward faith, hope, and love. In addition, they practice mindfulness and engage with the means of grace, cultivating a focused and present attitude toward God's mission. Finally, an integrated disciple seeks sanctification as the continuous renewal of their inner being, reflecting God's virtues in every context of life.

The discipleship process acknowledges the struggles and challenges inherent in the journey. Disciples stand firm on the conviction that God's love is unwavering (Romans 8:35-39). Just as neuroplasticity allows for resilience, discipleship enables believers to adapt spiritually, growing in grace and strength through the means of grace.

Integral discipleship is not merely a model but a transformative process that integrates neuroplasticity, mindfulness, the means of grace, and sanctification. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, this approach fosters mental, emotional, and spiritual renewal, equipping disciples to embody God's mission on earth. This transformation is characterized by resilience, continuous growth, and the pursuit of perfection in Christ.

Wesleyan sanctification situates this process within the broader narrative of divine love and grace, where disciples are continually refined to reflect God's glory and advance his kingdom. Through intentional practices and reliance on the Holy Spirit, integral discipleship becomes the journey by which believers embody the prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The interdisciplinary dialogue between neuroplasticity, mindfulness as a theologically neutral practice, and the Christian theology of sanctification demonstrates that while the human capacity for neuronal and emotional synchronization is significant, it finds its fullness in the vivifying breath of the Holy Spirit. Whereas scientific discoveries highlight the brain's resilience and its capacity to reorganize thought and behavioral patterns through *gnosis*, scripture presents epignosis as the transformative knowledge that can only be revealed by God.

Neuroscience, represented by the contributions of Dr. Nazareth Castellanos, Dr. Marian Rojas Estapé, and Dr. Ana Ibáñez, provides empirical foundations for understanding how practices such as mindfulness and conscious breathing can reorganize neural connections, promoting emotional and cognitive well-being. These practices, operating within the limits of *gnosis*, underscore humanity's inherent capacity to seek harmony and well-being. However, they fall short of fully addressing the spiritual dimension that Wesleyan theology defines as sanctification.

In contrast, the biblical testimony reveals that sanctification does not merely reorganize the mind and heart but holistically transforms the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. In John 20:22, Jesus' breath is not merely a symbolic act; it inaugurates the new creation in Christ, empowering the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit and comprehend scripture (Luke 24:45). This opening of understanding, accompanied by the continuous renewal described in Romans 6:22, positions sanctification as an integral process that surpasses any human achievement facilitated by cognitive sciences or neuroplasticity.

The Wesleyan tradition, with its emphasis on the "heart strangely warmed" and perfection in love, invites believers into transformative discipleship that addresses not only personal spiritual needs but also the contextual challenges of the church in an era of postmodernity and post-Christendom. Its focus on social holiness as the fruit of transformations experienced through God's grace equips believers to respond meaningfully to societal needs. This discipleship, informed by epignosis, reveals how God's grace operates in every dimension of human existence, preparing believers to lead communities toward integral renewal. The integration of science and theology, far from being a compromise, is an opportunity to reveal God's multifaceted grace and wisdom (1 Peter 4:10; Ephesians 3:10).

Finally, we affirm that neuroplasticity and mindfulness are valuable tools within *gnosis,* but it is the breath of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to reach their full potential in Christ. Sanctification, guided by epignosis, not only transforms individuals but also equips them to impact their contexts with God's perfect love and redeeming grace.

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CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The Wesleyan movement, often referred to as "the people of the burning heart," has historically been a custodian of the transformative message of sanctification. This ethos, deeply rooted in its theological and practical traditions, emphasizes a continuous transformation of individuals alongside the practice of “social holiness,” which seeks to impact both personal lives and broader communities. However, in contemporary contexts, the vitality and relevance of this movement has diminished, presenting an urgent need for renewal.

This project seeks to address this challenge by integrating the Wesleyan spiritual legacy with cutting-edge advancements in cognitive science, particularly in neurology and neurocardiology. Neuroplasticity—a foundational concept in these fields—demonstrates the brain and heart’s ability to regenerate neurons, form new neural connections, and adapt, in order to foster significant changes in thoughts, behaviors, and habits. These discoveries closely align with the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification as an ongoing process of personal and social transformation, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Historical and Biblical Foundations

To ground the project, I explored the theological and biblical roots of the Wesleyan movement. Key scriptures such as Jeremiah 2:2–5, Jeremiah 6:16, and Revelation 2:4–5 highlight the call to rekindle the "first love" and sustain the holiness of heart and life that defined development in the early Methodist church. These passages served as a framework for reflecting on the movement's founding principles and the need to reconnect with its transformative ethos.

Particularly influential was Acts 19:1-5 (Biblical Foundation Paper), where the apostle Paul exemplified the importance of seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance while collaborating with God in advancing his kingdom. Paul's journey reflected a holistic transformation—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—that reshaped how he perceived, engaged, and responded to the contexts into which God called him.

Additionally, the project draws heavily from the teachings of John Wesley and contemporary scholars such as Rev. Dr. Hugh Hendrickson. Hendrickson argued that spiritual transformation, as envisioned by Wesley, is an ongoing process that should manifest in observable behaviors and a deepening alignment with God's will. This historical foundation provides the theoretical framework necessary to evaluate how advances in neuroscience can complement and enhance Wesleyan ideals of sanctification.

Cognitive Science, Neuroplasticity, and Wesleyan Transformation

Central to the project is the exploration of neuroplasticity—the brain and heart's capacity to regenerate and establish new neural pathways. This dynamic capability supports ongoing transformation, aligning with Wesleyan theology's emphasis on

sanctification as a lifelong journey. Neurocardiology, a complementary discipline, reveals that the heart contains specialized neurons capable of direct communication with the brain. This brain-heart interaction fosters synchronization, which enhances learning, emotional regulation, and renewal processes.

The project links these scientific insights to the Wesleyan concept of a "burning heart," which represents both spiritual passion and the continuous pursuit of holiness. The Holy Spirit was identified as the ultimate agent facilitating this transformation, harmonizing mind and heart to align with divine purposes.

Dr. Hugh Hendrickson and United Methodist pastor and author Adam Hamilton provide additional insights into the relationship between intellect, emotion, and spiritual growth. Hamilton emphasized the necessity of balance, stating:

United Methodism must be intentional about finding harmony and balance between the mind and the heart. One of the hallmarks of John Wesley's faith, and of the 18th-century Methodist revival, was that it engaged not only the emotions but also the intellect—the mind as well as the heart.

Hamilton further elaborated, stating that "God gave us a brain and a heart. He wants us to use both. Jesus taught us to love God with our 'heart and soul,' as well as with our 'mind and strength.' This union of emotion and intellect has been a distinctive feature of Methodism."

Building on these perspectives, the project proposes extending this understanding to include neural and cognitive transformation. Advances in neuroplasticity and neurocardiology affirm that the brain and heart can synchronize to promote new thought patterns, behaviors, and spiritual practices. This transformation is not only measurable

but also transferable, offering a replicable framework for spiritual renewal aligned with Wesleyan holiness.[1]

Outcomes and Applications

The project demonstrated that the Wesleyan message of sanctification can be revitalized through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates theology and neuroscience. Specifically, the findings highlight three key areas:

1. Facilitating Personal Transformation: Participants experience cognitive and behavioral changes that help them renew their minds, break free from destructive thought patterns, and adopt habits reflecting a life of holiness.
2. Promoting Social Holiness: Effective discipleship strategies were developed to influence individuals and communities, fostering collective transformation rooted in sustainable spiritual practices.
3. Reviving the Wesleyan Legacy: The project reaffirms the relevance of Wesleyan theology in a modern world that seeks both spiritual depth and practical solutions.

By linking neuroscience with the Wesleyan tradition, the project demonstrates that faith and science are not adversaries but partners in promoting holistic transformation. This synergy provides a compelling model for Christian practice, equipping a new generation to live fully for God's glory.

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[1] Rev. Dr. Hugh E. Hendrickson, "Discipleship Formation in the Wesleyan Spirit: Getting the Class Back Together" (PhD diss., United Theological Seminary, 2020), 172.

Methodology

The methodology is intentionally designed to interweave Wesleyan theological principles—sanctification, spiritual discipline, and social holiness—with contemporary scientific insights, particularly neuroplasticity. This approach allows for an exploration of how devotional practices, structured training methods, and evidence-based tools can support measurable cognitive and spiritual transformation.

Key elements of the methodology included:

1. Theological Integration: Wesleyan principles are deeply embedded in the program, offering participants a spiritual framework for understanding transformation.
2. Scientific Insights: Neuroplasticity provides a model for understanding how cognitive and emotional patterns can be restructured through intentional practices.
3. Practical Application: Strategies such as “glory sightings,” daily prayers, and the 3Ds coaching model (Discover, Develop, Deploy) are employed to create a holistic and progressive experience.

Special attention is given to the demographic and ethnic diversity of participants to ensure the methodology was inclusive, contextually relevant, and adaptable to multicultural environments.

Description and Composition of the Participant Group

Participants are intentionally selected to reflect the demographic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the region under study. Pastors serving in remote rural areas with unique challenges are included, alongside those ministering in suburban and urban

contexts, which have distinctly different dynamics. This ensures that the project addresses a wide range of ministerial realities, from small farming communities to affluent urban congregations.

The group consists of thirteen participants: seven women and six men, representing African American, Hispanic, and Anglo ethnicities. Although logistical challenges reduced active participation to ten individuals, the diversity of perspectives enriched the project. Valuable insights explained how varying contexts shaped the application of Wesleyan principles.

Final Reflection

This project underscored that the Wesleyan movement's emphasis on spiritual transformation is as relevant today as it was in its inception. By blending theology with neuroscience, the project demonstrated that sanctification is not merely a theological abstraction but a measurable, replicable, and transformative process.

The integration of traditional Wesleyan principles with scientific advancements offers a practical framework for personal and communal renewal. While challenges such as technological limitations test the project's adaptability, the commitment of participants and the methodological design ensure that meaningful outcomes are achieved.

Ultimately, this work affirmed that the fusion of faith and science can illuminate new pathways for discipleship, offering a vision of holistic transformation that is both deeply spiritual and intellectually grounded. Such an approach invites future research and practice, equipping ministry leaders to address the complexities of contemporary ministry with innovative and faithful solutions.

Implementation

Class One: Facilities and Preparations: September 23, 2024

During the planning phase of the project, it became apparent that an appropriate space was required to host the sessions, which were scheduled to run for six to eight consecutive weeks. Fortunately, thanks to Rev. Wayne A. Mort and the Batavia First United Methodist Church (BFUMC), we secured an ideal venue. The BFUMC provided a spacious room equipped with comfortable tables, chairs, and a 60-inch television, which facilitated the inclusion of remote participants via a virtual platform. Moreover, the church allowed us to adapt the space to our needs, arranging the room to enable effective interaction between in-person and virtual attendees.

The first session was marked by both personal and technical challenges. One of my greatest fears was teaching and facilitating the session in English, my second language. Despite my teaching experience, this remains a significant challenge. To address this, I structured the material using a method I developed after studying the framework outlined in *The Four Disciplines of Execution* by Sean Covey and his team (Covey et al., 2012). This approach was adapted into a 1:3:3 framework as follows:

- 1: Wildly Important Goal (WIG), representing the central objective of each session.
- 3: Predictive Measures, serving as key indicators influencing the achievement of the goal.
- 3: Activities, representing specific actions designed to advance progress toward the WIG.

Each session was preceded by a survey which was emailed to participants. This tool, composed of both qualitative and quantitative questions, was designed to prepare attendees and foster pre-session reflection.

To cater to diverse learning styles and address participants' digital engagement, each session was structured and facilitated using PowerPoint presentations, following this format:

1. Pre-Session Survey: Sent via email. Individual responses were kept private and were not discussed during group sessions.
2. Devotional and Welcome: Each session began with a devotional designed to foster intentional spiritual formation.
3. Session Content: Delivered according to the 1:3:3 framework to ensure a clear and practical flow of topics.

The first session lasted approximately 90 minutes and presented unexpected challenges. Some participants who were expected to join virtually were unable to connect due to technical difficulties beyond our control. Despite these setbacks, the session proceeded as planned, following this structure:

1. Devotional (15 minutes):
    a. Participants were introduced to the need for beginning each module with spiritual disciplines, including prayer, Scripture reading, and reflection.
    b. Glory Sightings were designed to help participants identify God's work in their lives, even amid challenging circumstances.
2. Model Main Content (60 minutes)

- Wildly Important Goal (WIG):[2] An introduction to the project's purpose and central objectives.
- Predictive Measures

This session required participants to identify the core problem and formulate a hypothesis as follows:

1. Interconnection: Exploring the relationship between Wesleyan theology of sanctification and neuroplasticity.
2. Expected Outcomes: Projecting the results of applying this interdisciplinary framework.

The pre-session survey was designed to assess participants' initial knowledge and perspectives. The questions were categorized as follows:

- Quantitative (5 questions): Scales to evaluate the frequency of spiritual practices and personal satisfaction with spiritual growth.
- Qualitative (12 questions): Reflective questions focused on theological concepts and their impact on ministry.
- Definition of Terms (4 terms): Requests for precise definitions of key theological concepts in Wesleyan tradition.

The survey contained six questions:

1. On a scale from 1 to 5, how frequently do you practice personal spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, Bible study, fasting, or silence?

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[2] Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling,. *The Four Disciplines of Execution,* Kindle Edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), https://a.co/5a5Fcuh.

2. On a scale from 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with your spiritual growth and development?
3. How do you understand the concept of salvation in the Wesleyan tradition, particularly concerning justification, sanctification, and Christian perfection?
4. How have Wesleyan principles of sanctification, social holiness, and Christian perfection shaped the spiritual environment in your faith community?
5. Define "soteriology" in the context of the Wesleyan tradition.
6. This session set the stage for deeper exploration, equipping participants with a clear framework for understanding the intersection of Wesleyan theology, cognitive science, and their practical applications in ministry.

Class Two: Foundations for Transformation, September 30, 2024

The second class established a foundational framework for advancing toward holistic transformation in cognitive patterns and thinking styles, setting the stage for the topics explored in the third class. This session focused on guiding participants from an innate, automatic, and instinctive state toward intentional reflection shaped by capacities such as creativity, innovation, and resilience. These abilities, driven by human curiosity, have not only facilitated advancements in modern science but also provided tools to explore and transform both our environment and our spirituality.

The interdisciplinary approach integrated several essential pillars: biblical foundations, theological principles, and cognitive science, with an emphasis on neuroplasticity and its relationship to the theology of sanctification. This framework allowed participants to examine how neuroplasticity offers a practical model for

managing automatic responses and progressing toward rational and intentional thought. Furthermore, it reinforced the notion that sanctification, or the "deposit" made by the Holy Spirit in the Wesleyan movement is not only theologically valid but also scientifically plausible and renewable in contemporary contexts.

Human development from an innate, automatic, and instinctive state to one of rationality, creativity, innovation, and resilience (CIR), represents not only cognitive advancement but also a spiritual capacity to question, reflect, and connect with the transcendental. This process, underpinned by neuroplasticity, enables individuals to move beyond instinctive reactions, opening the door to introspection and the pursuit of purpose.

When confronted with the transcendental, individuals often adopt one of two postures:

- Resistance and denial**:** A rejection of the metaphysical in favor of an exclusively rational worldview (Descartes, 1641).
- Acceptance and embracing**:** A disposition to connect with the transcendental, often expressed as innate spirituality or "neutral theology" (Andrew, 2020). This concept describes a tendency toward the metaphysical and spiritual while not associating it with a specific deity, reflecting humanity’s quest for meaning through imagination and spiritual connection.

The progression from innate to rational aligns directly with the 3Ds methodology employed in this project: Discover, Develop, Deploy.

1. Discover**:** Introduce unfamiliar concepts, such as the transformative impact of neuroplasticity, which helps identify how automatic responses can be intentionally managed through sanctification.

2. Develop**:** Delve deeper into acquired knowledge, exploring how the formation of new neural connections can open pathways to the transcendental and spiritual, fostering new perceptions and behaviors.
3. Deploy**:** Apply this understanding through intentional spiritual practices, such as the mental detox program proposed by Dr. Caroline Leaf in her book *Switch on Your Brain*,[3] aligns with Romans 12:2. This daily exercise integrates mind, body, and spirit, promoting a conscious spirituality applicable to various lifestyles and ministerial contexts.

Further, the 3D model ensures that learning does not remain theoretical but translates into practical, transformative actions in both personal and ministerial life.

Class Two not only covered theoretical foundations but also equipped participants with practical tools to recognize automatic and instinctive patterns, develop deeper spiritual and cognitive awareness, and innovate through practices that integrate mind, body, and spirit. Finally, Class Two compared human *gnosis* and divine epignosis, highlighting that sanctification transcends human effort, positioning itself as a supernatural manifestation of God's transformative power. This power, according to Wesleyan ethos and tradition, is revealed and manifested progressively.

Sanctification, understood as a spiritual journey, begins with the awakening of grace in the individual, symbolized by what John Wesley referred to as a "burning heart." This awakening, prompted by the Holy Spirit, leads the believer to a state of conviction

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[3] Caroline Leaf. *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, Kindle edition, last accessed February 14, 2025 (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group), 2017https://a.co/4JtHeh3.

and acceptance of the divine invitation to embark on the process of sanctification. This process is not only continuous but deeply rooted in God's epignosis—a revealed knowledge that completely transforms the believer, shaping their mind, spirit, and actions. In essence, sanctification is not merely an individual journey but a tangible manifestation of God's power working in the lives of believers, enabling them to reflect His will and purpose at every stage of their spiritual transformation.

Class Three: Exploring Gnosis, Epignosis, and Their Transformative Impact, October 14, 2024

The third class presented a challenge both conceptually and pedagogically as it sought to articulate the connections between cognitive science and neuroplasticity; spiritual formation, and the theology of sanctification. This session contrasted two fundamental concepts: *gnosis*, representing human knowledge derived from science and theologically neutral spiritual practices, and epignosis, the divine knowledge revealed by God that transforms the believer who is filled with the Holy Spirit. This interdisciplinary framework provided participants with tools to reflect on how to integrate these perspectives into their personal and ministerial lives (Romans 6:22; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:10, New International Version [NIV]).

The class addressed the concept of reconciliation between science and spirituality, emphasizing that the two are not inherently in conflict but can complement each other. Alister McGrath (2020) argues that science and faith, when working together, not only enrich our understanding of the universe but also foster a deeper comprehension of human purpose. This approach was supported by Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:20, which

highlight how creation reveals the glory and wisdom of God, who actively invites humanity into deeper intimacy and understanding with Him.

As part of the methodological design, a qualitative survey was conducted prior to the session to explore participants' expectations regarding the integration of God's Word into their spiritual and mental transformation process. One of the questions posed was: "What do you expect to happen in your daily life as a result of integrating the Word of God into your process of spiritual and mental transformation?" Two responses stood out for their depth. The first one stated,

> By integrating the Word of God into my life, a process of transformation begins in my way of thinking, acting, and reacting that will allow me to live more and more in accordance with His will. As a consequence, I will have a life of order in every area and a serene and peaceful life.

The second response read as follows:

> I expect my daily life as a result of integrating the Word of God into my process of spiritual and mental transformation to renew my heart, mind, and soul, to be overtaken by the Holy Spirit. This will enable me to let my actions be ordered also by the Holy Spirit."

Additionally, a quantitative survey measured participants' clarity on the relationship between spiritual, mental, and behavioral transformation. The survey asked, "On a scale from 1 to 5, how aware do you feel about the relationship between neuroplasticity and your spirituality?" Results showed that 80% of participants identified with a level 4, while 20% identified with a level 3, indicating that most participants had some knowledge of this connection, though it was not deeply developed.

The class presented a comparison between two dimensions of knowledge: *gnosis* and epignosis. It emphasized how both contribute to human understanding but from distinct perspectives: *Gnosis* represents knowledge acquired through human effort and

scientific exploration. Andrew Newberg[4] highlights that the human brain is wired to seek meaning and transcendence, which explains why practices like mindfulness and meditation have gained popularity as tools for mental and emotional well-being. However, such practices often remain confined to rational or emotional domains without reaching the transformative depth of divine revelation. Epignosis refers to revealed knowledge that transcends human capacity. This knowledge, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, not only enlightens the mind but transforms the heart and guides the believer's actions (Colossians 3:10; 2 Peter 1:3, 8, NIV). Dr. Schwartz delves into how mental focus can influence brain activity, suggesting that our thoughts and attention can actively shape our neural circuitry. This aligns with the notion that neuroplastic processes can be intentionally directed toward spiritual goals when accompanied by meditation on transcendent and biblical values.[5] A central theme in this session was neuroplasticity, defined as the brain's ability to reorganize and form new neural connections. According to Caroline Leaf, when combined with spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation on God's Word, neuroplasticity not only facilitates cognitive development but also enables spiritual transformation. The session introduced a conceptual framework comprising three interconnected dimensions: spiritual formation, neuroplasticity, and sanctification. This triangle was designed to function holistically in the believer's development. According to the Wesleyan ethos, the

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[4] Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*.

[5] Jeffery Shcwartz. Being Mindful and Changing your brain. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwhPlEASgTw

indivisible application of these dimensions generates a transformative synergy encompassing mind, body, and spirit.[6]

Participants reflected on how these dimensions interact intentionally to produce tangible changes. They came to understand that spiritual formation provides the theological and disciplinary foundation, neuroplasticity offers a scientific model for cognitive and behavioral change, and sanctification directs the process toward a life aligned with God's will. When integrated consciously, these three dimensions not only yield measurable outcomes, such as the development of new habits and perceptions, but also facilitate the expansion of ministry in dynamic and challenging contexts.

The class further explored mindfulness and reconciliation with Christian spirituality, using a definition of mindfulness proposed by American professor emeritus of medicine and the creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "the awareness that arises from paying attention intentionally, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."[7] This approach provides practical tools for managing stress and anxiety but lacks explicit theological grounding. Although practices like mindfulness originate in Eastern spiritual traditions, their growing acceptance in scientific domains has sparked debates about their compatibility with Christian faith.

This session proposed that rather than rejecting such practices outright, ministry leaders could reconcile them with a Christian worldview. Psalm 121:1-2 and Colossians

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[6] Leaf, *Switch on your Brain*.

[7] Jon Kabat-Zinn, "The Definition of Mindfulness," Jon Kabat-Zinn: Defining Mindfulness, last accessed February 14, 2025, https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/.

1:16 remind us that all wisdom and knowledge originate from God, allowing believers to adopt practices like mindfulness while subordinating them to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a deeper theological understanding.

Class Three highlighted how integrating concepts like neuroplasticity, spiritual formation, and sanctification can provide transformative tools for ministry leaders. By inviting participants to deepen their understanding of epignosis, they were encouraged to reflect on how to move beyond the limitations of human knowledge and embrace divine revelation that transforms lives and ministries. This interdisciplinary model not only offers a practical framework for discipleship but also invites a reconciliation between science and faith, emphasizing that the two can work together to reveal God's glory and purpose in the lives of believers.

Class Four: Discipleship Process: Four Foundational Pillars, October 21, 2024

As part of the conceptual framework presented during the program, this project shares a synthesis of the discipleship process which is structured around four foundational pillars: awakening, formation, equipping, and modeling. This framework provided participants with a structured map for spiritual growth and ministerial leadership. The pillars guided content and objectives of the fourth class.

1. Awakening introduces participants to the transformative power of divine grace, which awakens their spiritual awareness.
2. Formation develops solid theological and spiritual foundations, shaping character in alignment with Christ.

3. Equipping provides practical tools for applying faith in personal and communal contexts.
4. Modeling encourages reflection on the importance of living a testimony that inspires and disciples others.

During the fourth class, various perspectives—neurology, theologically neutral spirituality, and the Wesleyan ethos of sanctification—were integrated, using human breathing as a central theme. From a scientific perspective, participants explored how breathing regulates cognitive, emotional, and functional processes by facilitating oxygenation and promoting mental equilibrium. In the field of neutral neurotheology, participants came to understand breathing as a conscious practice that enhances concentration and reduces stress by reconnecting the mind to the present moment. The discussion highlighted how this understanding, initially associated with *gnosis*, reflected partial knowledge rooted in human capabilities. However, the class guided participants toward epignosis, understood as knowledge directly revealed by God through the Holy Spirit.

The class then delved into breathing as a symbol of the divine breath, or, in Hebrew, Ruach Elohim, which gave life to humanity at creation (Genesis 2:7). This concept was expanded through an analysis of the day of resurrection, when Christ breathed on His disciples, imparting the Holy Spirit as the "new Adam" and enabling them to access the epignosis of God (Romans 5:12-21). This act was presented not only as a vivifying gesture but also to open understanding and comprehend scripture, as described in Luke 24:45: “Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” The narrative highlighted how this spiritual breath connected Christ’s

resurrection with the holistic transformation of believers. According to 1 Corinthians 15:45, the "last Adam" was presented as a "life-giving spirit," enabling disciples to walk in a new dimension of spiritual life that conformed them to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

This class discussion proposed that this act of breathing granted believers access to the power of God, the same power that raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19-20). This power was presented as both transformative and renewing, capable of renewing the spirit of the mind (Ephesians 4:23), enabling believers to transcend the patterns of this age and experience transformation in accordance with Romans 12:2. Furthermore, participants learned how this power allows believers to participate in the divine nature here and now, fulfilling 2 Peter 1:3-4.

The class emphasized that the deposit made by the Holy Spirit to the Wesleyan movement of sanctification transcends the limitations of scientific neuroplasticity and transcendental religions. This deposit, exemplified by the experience of the "burning heart," not only marked the beginning of a spiritual renewal process but also established a superior dimension of transformation, synchronizing the human being with the power of resurrection operating daily in their life.

Participants learned that, from a Wesleyan perspective, sanctification is not merely a cognitive phenomenon, or a practice based on human effort but a manifestation of the supreme power of the Holy Spirit. This power, which renews the "spirit of the mind" (Ephesians 4:23) and equips the believer to live in the fullness of divine purpose, acts integrally, touching the mind, body, and spirit. Unlike the neuroplastic processes

proposed by science, sanctification perfectly and consistently synchronizes all aspects of the human being under divine direction.

At the end of the class, participants first understood the importance of sanctification as the identity of Wesleyan ministry. They internalized the concept that the process of sanctification is not merely spiritual growth, but an ongoing transformation facilitated by the Holy Spirit. This transformation leads believers to experience Christian perfection in a holistic manner.

Secondly, deep spiritual reconnection encouraged participants to adopt spiritual practices which reflect this higher dimension. These practices include meditative prayer centered on the Holy Spirit and biblical study aimed at experiencing sanctification. Applying these practices demonstrates their transcendence over purely cognitive or transcendental methods.

Third, testimony of resurrection power equips leaders to serve as living witnesses of the transformation produced by the Holy Spirit. This testimony emphasizes how the power of the resurrection surpasses human transformation models. Further, the transformation manifests Christ's resurrected life in the believer's daily experience.

Discipleship centered on the Holy Spirit designs strategies to help participants integrate sanctification as a supernatural and renewing act of the Holy Spirit. These strategies continually operate within the believer and synchronize mind, body, and spirit in perfect harmony. This overall approach invited ministerial leaders to reflect on and live sanctification as the core of Wesleyan spirituality, understanding it as a divine act that surpasses any human paradigm, transforming the believer into an agent of God's glory.

Classes 5 and 6 Synthesis: Integrating Neuroplasticity, Mindfulness, Means of Grace, and Wesleyan Sanctification, October 28 and November 11, 2024

The discipleship process facilitated in classes five and six was presented as a cyclical-linear model, reflecting both the repetitive rhythms of human life and the linear progression of God's redemptive plan. This dual dynamic formed the foundation for exploring how spiritual growth is intertwined with concepts of neuroplasticity, mindfulness, the means of grace, and the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification. These elements were integrated into four essential and interdependent stages, designed to guide believers in their journey of spiritual formation and maturity.

The Four Stages of Discipleship

The four stages of discipleship are:

1. Awakening: The call to grace

This initial stage focused on recognizing God's grace as the catalyst for transformation. Participants explored how neuroplasticity serves as a metaphor for spiritual awakening, as the openness to grace reconfigures thought patterns and facilitates new pathways of faith, hope, and love. The means of grace (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, and sacraments) emphasized critical practices that open the heart to God's work, fostering a readiness for sanctification. These awakenings parallel the Wesleyan experience of prevenient grace, which prepares the mind and spirit for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Formation: Continuous spiritual growth

The formation stage was presented as a lifelong process of being shaped by God's truth. Participants learned how mindfulness, integrated with the means of grace, aids believers in focusing on God's presence, reducing distractions, and deepening their spiritual awareness. This stage was linked to the Wesleyan understanding of progressive sanctification, where believers are purified and perfected through the Holy Spirit. By incorporating biblical meditation, worship, and communion, participants were equipped to manage thoughts and emotions, internalize Christ's teachings, and move closer to perfection in love.

3. Equipping-Training (Learning Experience): Preparation for Ministry

Participants explored how intentional practices rooted in neuroplasticity—such as repetitive acts of service, scripture meditation, and communal worship—create neural pathways that align behaviors with Christ's character. In the Wesleyan tradition, this equipping was described as practical sanctification, where inner transformation is manifested in outward actions. The means of grace were highlighted as tools that reinforce spiritual resilience and enable the development of habits for justice, mercy, and faithful service.

4. Modeling (Missional-Evangelist): Reflecting Christ in Daily Life

The final stage emphasized embodying Christ's character through actions and attitudes. Participants examined how mindfulness and sustained engagement with spiritual disciplines strengthen the capacity to live out God's virtues in every context. This stage was framed as the culmination of the discipleship process, where complete sanctification—described in Wesleyan theology as perfection in love—becomes visible.

By reflecting God's character, believers contribute to social holiness, embodying Christ's love in their communities.

The classes then highlighted a profound theological distinction between cultures that prioritize "doing" to justify "being" and the Wesleyan framework, where being—as a child of God, justified by grace—precedes and enables doing (Ephesians 2:8-10). This identity, rooted in Christ, calls believers into sanctification (Romans 6:22), not merely as a goal but as a dynamic, lifelong process guided by the Holy Spirit and sustained by the means of grace. Participants explored how neuroplasticity mirrors this spiritual transformation. Repeated spiritual practices, such as meditation on scripture and acts of grace, reinforce new mental and spiritual pathways, anchoring the believer's identity in Christ. Through mindfulness, disciples remain present and aligned with their calling, bridging the gap between identity and action. This integration reflects the Wesleyan ethos of sanctification, where the believer's life becomes a continuous expression of transformation and divine love.

Integrated Disciple, Defined

The class then explored the definition of an integrated disciple. This is someone who:

1. Is drawn by God's grace, responding to prevenient grace as the foundation of transformation.
2. Allows divine love to reconfigure thought patterns through spiritual neuroplasticity, embracing a deeper relationship with Christ.
3. Develops Christlike character by practicing mindfulness and participating in the means of grace, staying focused on God's mission.

4. Seeks sanctification by modeling Christ's virtues, continuously renewing their mind and adapting their life to align with God's will.

This definition highlighted how discipleship prepares believers to navigate challenges while remaining rooted in the assurance of God's love (Romans 8:35-39). Just as neuroplasticity enables resilience and adaptation, spiritual disciplines empower believers to reconfigure their minds and spirits, strengthening their faith and moving toward perfection in love.

The classes concluded with a synthesis of integral discipleship, merging neuroplasticity, mindfulness, the means of grace, and sanctification as a cohesive process. Participants were encouraged to view discipleship as a continuous journey of mental, emotional, and spiritual transformation, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. This transformation, sustained by grace, equips believers to renew their minds and embody God's mission on earth: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Through this integrative approach, participants were reminded of the Wesleyan legacy of sanctification, a dynamic process that fosters resilience, deepens faith, and reflects Christ's love in all aspects of life.

Reflection on Learning: Personal and Ministerial

The development and implementation of this project have been transformative on multiple levels, challenging me to continuously reinvent myself both personally and ministerially. Throughout this journey, I have identified several key areas of learning. They will play an important part in improving future initiatives.

One of the most significant areas of learning has been a deeper engagement with topics such as neurotheology and neuroplasticity, which have captivated my attention since the early 2000s. I recognize that cognitive science, particularly its branches related to neurology, is undergoing one of its most revolutionary moments in history. Research in this field fuels various aspects of modern life, including technology, social engineering, communications, education, and the digital age.

I have learned that these scientific advancements provide a vast reservoir of verifiable knowledge that is relevant to the church and its transformative mission. However, I also understand that integrating this knowledge into a ministerial training program is not a straightforward task. The complexity of the material posed a significant challenge: attempting to discuss the dimensions of the human brain from a theological perspective without delving deeply into its anatomy, biology, or biochemistry has resulted in a superficial approach. This miscalculation underestimated the complexity and depth of the subject, particularly for a program spanning only six to eight weeks.

Reflecting on the history of the church, I confirmed that it has always responded to the significant revolutions of its time, albeit often with some delay. This project allowed me to position myself at the intersection of innovation and creativity, two essential components of the cohort I worked with. This context inspired me to envision how the 21st-century church can proactively adopt scientific discoveries, integrating them into its theology and ministerial practices to foster a deeper and more relevant spiritual transformation.

The project’s implementation was not without its difficulties. I experienced unexpected personal and ministerial changes, which affected my availability and focus.

A lack of support and direction from the cohort director's office created a gap in strategic guidance and support. Technical issues with the proposed digital platform disrupted access and session flow. This negatively impacted participant engagement, with some members withdrawing and others participating sporadically due to competing commitments. Despite these setbacks, I believe this project has great potential. These difficulties not only prompted me to reevaluate my approach but also provided growth opportunities that will be invaluable for future developments.

Although the data collected during the project implementation is valuable and provides significant insights, I acknowledge that it lacked density and consistency. The intermittent participation of some attendees and time constraints affected the depth and breadth of responses, limiting the potential for a more comprehensive analysis. This highlights the importance of developing improved data collection strategies for future iterations, including more dynamic and accessible tools for participants.

Now that I have returned to pastoral ministry, I plan to relaunch this project with a more deliberate and strategic approach. This renewed focus will allow for deeper engagement with the content, better alignment with participant capacities and needs, and the creation of a space where theological knowledge, cognitive science, and spiritual formation can integrate more effectively. I am convinced that with the necessary adjustments, this project can significantly impact spiritual development and ministerial leadership in faith communities.

Analysis of Collected Data

The data collected stems from a series of qualitative and quantitative questions designed to understand the project participants' spiritual practices, their frequency and depth, and their connection to the means of grace within the context of their spiritual and ministerial lives. The surveys were structured around three main themes:

1. Spiritual formation and means of grace: Assessing how participants identified and experienced the means of grace in their daily lives.
2. Theology and Wesleyan ethos: Exploring participants' level of understanding and experience with the Wesleyan ethos and its intersection with the theology of sanctification.
3. Neuroplasticity, mindfulness and spiritual transformation: Examining participants' knowledge of cognitive sciences, particularly neuroplasticity, and its relevance to spiritual transformation.

What follows is a sample of qualitative survey questions, and their responses, from participants.

Question: In your experience, how do mindfulness practices align with or differ from traditional Christian spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation?

> Participant 1: In the midst of such a hectic and busy culture, mindfulness is an exercise that allows us to focus and make better use of spiritual disciplines. This practice allows us to be grateful.
> Participant 2: I'm practicing mindfulness of God's work in me as a repetitive prayer to Jesus Christ while I lie awake in bed at night. It has been helpful in making me feel connected to God.

Figure 1

Question: In what ways do you think spiritual formation, sanctifying theology, and neuroplasticity can work together to influence a believer's transformation?

> Participant 1: Neuroplasticity allows the brain to adapt and mold itself with new knowledge and experiences. Spiritual formation and sanctifying theology thus become a new path of transformation and growth, helping the believer to adapt to a new experience and lifestyle.
>
> Participant 2: The process of spiritual formation involves the intentional development of spiritual practices and disciplines, such as prayer, meditation, and community engagement. These practices shape a believer's character, helping them cultivate virtues like love, patience, and humility. As individuals engage in spiritual formation, they create a framework for personal growth and transformation. The theological perspective of sanctifying theology emphasizes the process of being made holy, often linked to the believer's relationship with God and the work of the Holy Spirit. It reinforces the idea that transformation is not just a personal endeavor but a divine process. By understanding and embracing sanctifying theology, believers recognize that their growth is rooted in grace and reliance on God, encouraging them to pursue a deeper relationship with Him. The scientific concept of neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. Spiritual practices can influence neuroplasticity by creating new pathways in the brain. For example, regular meditation or prayer can enhance emotional regulation, increase empathy, and improve mental resilience. This physical change in the brain can reinforce spiritual growth, making it easier for believers to embody the virtues emphasized in spiritual formation and sanctifying theology.

Figure 2

Spiritual disciplines practiced consistently can lead to changes in the brain that support a more Christlike character. Neuroplasticity suggests that as believers engage in these practices, they can develop new habits and mindsets that align with their spiritual goals. Understanding emotional and cognitive benefits of spiritual practices can motivate believers to engage more deeply. As they experience tangible changes in their mental state—like reduced anxiety or increased peace—they may become more committed to their spiritual journey. Engaging with a community that emphasizes both spiritual formation and theological understanding can provide accountability and encouragement. As believers share their experiences and insights, they reinforce each other's growth,

creating a collective environment conducive to transformation. By integrating spiritual formation, theology, and neuroscience, believers can approach their transformation holistically. They can see their spiritual growth not just as an abstract concept but as something that involves their entire being—mind, heart, and soul. In summary, the synergy of spiritual formation, sanctifying theology, and neuroplasticity creates a powerful framework for transformation, enabling believers to grow in faith, character, and resilience in their spiritual journeys.

Quantitative Responses:

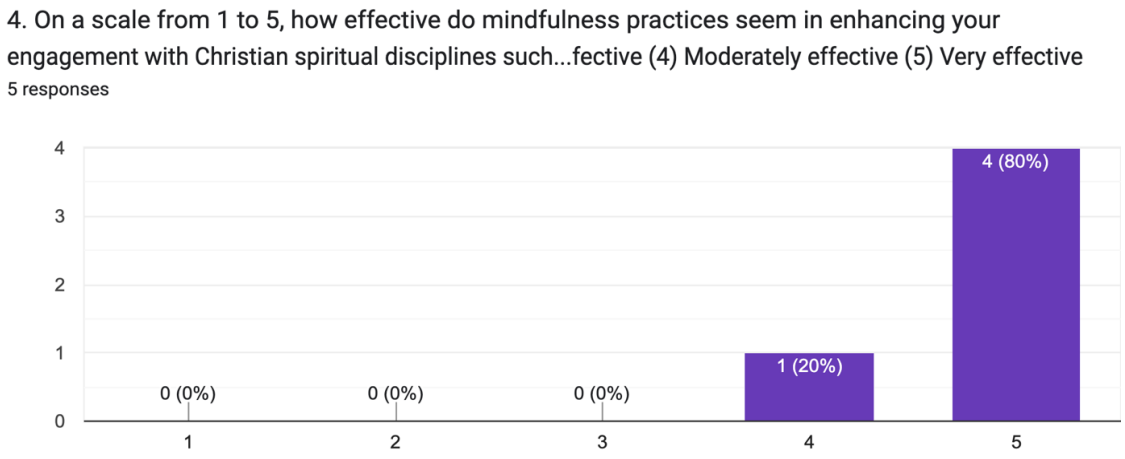

Figure 3

Evaluation

1. Understanding of cognitive sciences and neuroplasticity:

This project evaluated participants' familiarity with basic neuroplasticity concepts and their application to spiritual and ministerial journeys. Responses reflected varying

levels of familiarity with these concepts. Some participants had only limited understanding; others showed emerging interest in integrating these concepts into ministerial practice.

Survey Example:

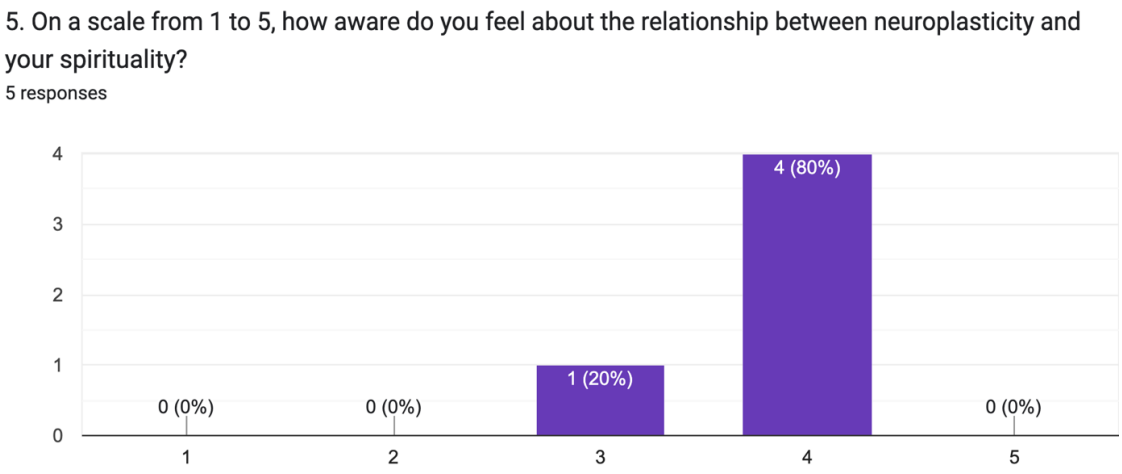

Figure 4

2. Spiritual formation and theology of sanctification:

One question posed was, “How do you interpret the concept of the “breath of God” in your spiritual life from a mental and emotional connection perspective?” There were five responses:

1) The breath of God is what gives me life, mentally, emotionally, and in every aspect of spiritual life.

2) Like His presence bringing revelation, strength and awareness in my life. That presence that brings peace and encouragement when we need it most. I'm not sure what this means. Let's discuss.
3) The breath of God is what the Holy Spirit does in and through me for the will of God. It reaches into every aspect of my being.
4) The breath of God is the whisper of the Holy Spirit moving us and guiding us. Truth is revealed to us.
5) From a mental and emotional connection, I interpret the concept of the "breath of God" as a new beginning, renewing of my mind, and feeling the love of God.

Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences with the Holy Spirit and their understanding of sanctification in their daily lives. The project emphasized the practice of the means of grace, such as prayer, scripture reading, communion, and meditation, to discern their level of integration into participants' spiritual lives.

3.Wesleyan ethos and spiritual practices:

The survey assessed participants' familiarity with the Wesleyan ethos, including their understanding of Christian perfection, practical holiness, and life in community. Additionally, the surveys explored how these practices influenced participants' faith journeys and their ability to face personal and ministerial challenges. The question was as follows:

The last survey did provide a significant majority (83.3%) of respondents rated their understanding of the connection between renewing the mind, neuroscience, and

sanctifying theology at level 4, with an additional 16.7% at level 5. This confirms that participants gained a clearer conceptual grasp of this relationship (see graph 4).

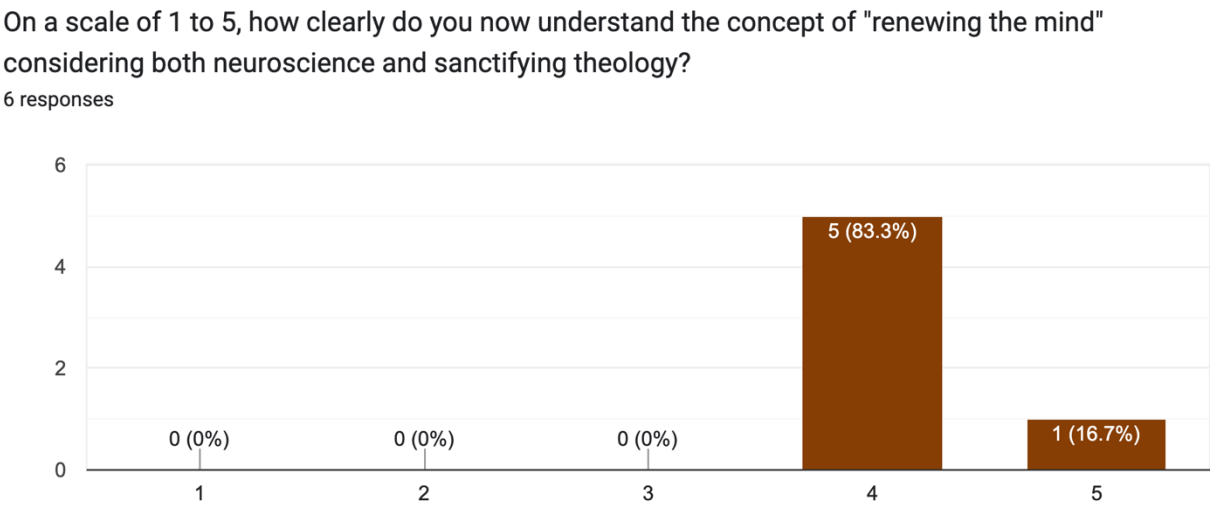

Figure 5

The analyzed graph aligns consistently and in parallel with the responses obtained from one of the key questions in the study. Notably, one participant summarized their new understanding of the interconnection between sanctification and neuroplasticity with the following statement: “This act of replacing old patterns, concepts, and lifestyles produces a positive change that brings us closer to the image of the perfect man.” Another participant reinforced this perspective by emphasizing the role of surrender and divine influence in spiritual transformation**:** “One can only grow when we recognize that we are not in control and allow our minds to be filled with the Word of God.” These reflections indicate a progressive learning process, wherein participants, after being exposed to the study material, demonstrated a growing interest in deepening

their understanding and application of the relationship between sanctification and neuroplasticity. The proposed integration was not only theoretically accepted but also inspired participants to actively explore its implementation in both their personal and ministerial lives. This affirms the theological and neurological foundation of sanctification, validating the Wesleyan emphasis on progressive holiness through habitual transformation of thought and behavior.

Neuroscience as a Practical and Accessible Tool for Sanctification

Survey responses indicated strong support for the integration of scientific insights into spiritual formation:

- 100% of respondents agreed that neuroscience makes the sanctification process more practical and accessible (see graph 5).
- Neuroscience helps explain how neural pathways are rewired through spiritual disciplines, reinforcing transformation.
- Participants viewed science and faith as complementary, rather than contradictory, in shaping discipleship models.

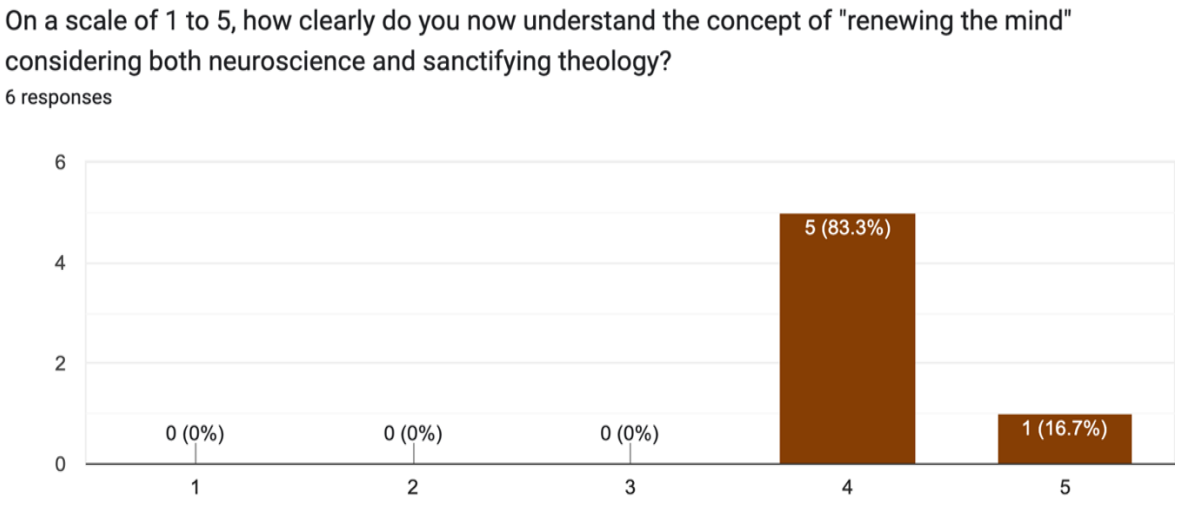

Figure 6

Church discipleship models should leverage scientific insights to reinforce theological teaching, making spiritual growth a tangible, measurable process that aligns with biblical principles and neuroscientific realities.

The Role of Mental Health in Discipleship and Spiritual Growth

Participants recognized the importance of integrating mental health into spiritual formation, with some noting:

- Emotional and mental health are foundational to a believer's well-being and should be addressed pastorally.
- Engaging in spiritual disciplines (worship, prayer, Christian fellowship) has improved mental stability for some individuals.
- Churches must become proactive in mental health strategies, rather than separating theology from psychological well-being.

A significant number of participants (50%) strongly agreed, and 50% agreed (rated 4 or 5) that integrating neuroscience and sanctifying theology can improve discipleship (Graph 6).

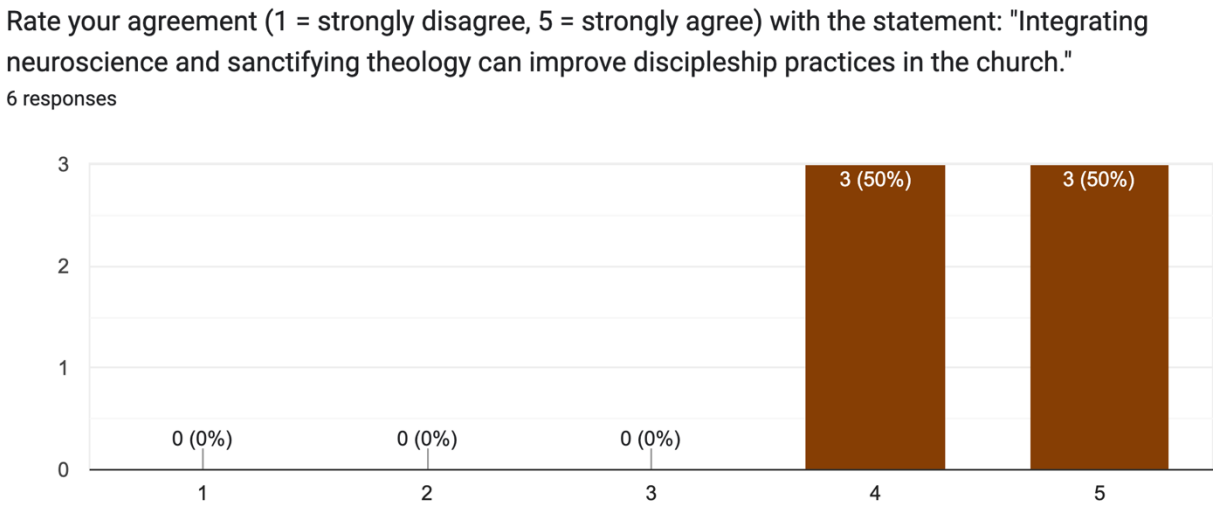

Figure 7

One of the participants, in response to the survey question: *"How familiar are you with the idea of integrating mental health strategies with spiritual formation within the church context?"*, provided valuable insights that enhanced the study's findings.

The participant stated:

> "Mental health is undoubtedly a priority, as it has increasingly become a significant concern. Its decline has been evident for many years, and I believe it is directly related to the decrease in engagement with spiritual formation. Recently, I spoke with a young woman who testified that when she began prioritizing the care of her soul, she found mental stability. Regular attendance at worship services, participation in small groups, and listening to Christian music have been key factors in stabilizing her mental health. In fact, she has completely discontinued her medication and is now thriving in all aspects of her life. I believe this is a root issue that could be more effectively addressed within the context of the church."

This statement supports the study's hypothesis**,** emphasizing the intrinsic connection between spiritual formation and mental well-being**.** Additionally, it highlights the **need** for churches to take an active role in integrating mental health strategies into their spiritual framework**,** fostering environments that promote emotional healing and psychological stability among their members. This confirms that effective discipleship must include psychological and emotional dimensions, ensuring mental wellness is part of spiritual formation.

Readiness to Apply Interdisciplinary Approaches in Spiritual Growth

Participants expressed varying levels of confidence in applying interdisciplinary methods in their faith journey:

- 50% rated their readiness at level 3 or lower (Graph 7).
- Only 16.7% felt fully equipped (level 5).

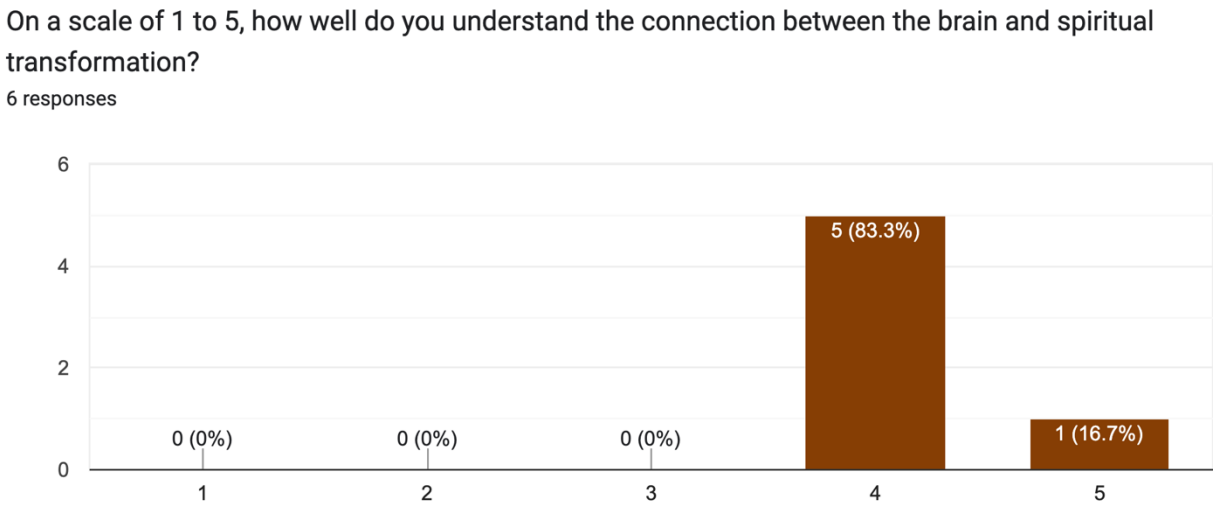

Figure 8

While participants recognize the value of interdisciplinary approaches, they may need further training and resources to integrate neuroscience into practical discipleship. Future church education models should focus on equipping leaders and congregants with accessible tools to apply these insights.

Neuroscience Expands Understanding of God's Transformative Power

Participants reported an expanded view of sanctification through neuroscience, with responses highlighting:

- A greater awareness of how spiritual formation reshapes the brain.
- A deeper appreciation for the biological mechanisms that align with theological concepts.
- Increased interest in exploring neuroscience further.

A majority (83.3%) rated their understanding of brain-spiritual transformation at level 4, while 16.7% rated it at level 5 (Graph 9).

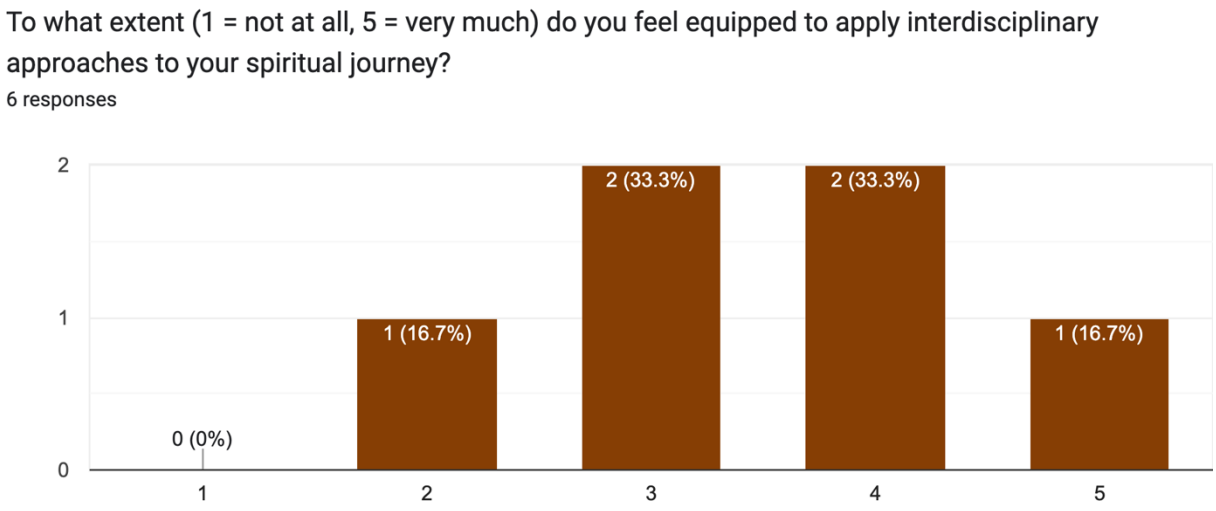

Figure 9

Observations and Findings

Analysis

The survey results identified prayer, scripture meditation, and reflection on the presence of Christ as essential spiritual practices that contribute to both emotional and spiritual resilience. While neuroplasticity was a novel concept for most participants, there was a clear interest in understanding how scientific principles could enrich spiritual and mental renewal. However, despite the valuable insights collected, responses lacked depth

and consistency, highlighting the need for a more structured and extended engagement with these topics to foster a comprehensive and applicable understanding.

Analysis and evaluation of data in light of the hypothesis

The findings were evaluated against the hypothesis, which posits that church communities implementing a well-structured and theologically grounded discipleship framework—integrating neuroplasticity, sanctification, and spiritual formation—are more likely to foster spiritual maturity, engagement, and retention. The results indicate several key insights regarding the pastoral participants' spiritual practices, theological knowledge, and receptivity to innovative approaches.

Commitment to Spiritual Formation

The data highlights a strong commitment to spiritual growth, with approximately 80% of participants affirming their dedication to spiritual formation. This aligns with the hypothesis that intentional discipleship fosters deeper engagement and retention. Respondents also demonstrated a clear understanding of their ministerial roles, emphasizing the need to cultivate personal and communal spiritual development.

Awareness of Wesleyan Ethos and Tradition

A significant 100% of participants acknowledged a gap in their knowledge of the Wesleyan ethos, traditions, and theological foundations within the Wesleyan movement. This gap presents an opportunity for targeted education that could enhance their leadership capacity and equip them to align their congregations with Wesleyan

theological principles. The finding further reinforces the hypothesis that a strong theological foundation is crucial for holistic spiritual transformation.

Engagement with Spiritual Disciplines

Approximately 80% of participants reported regular engagement with spiritual disciplines such as prayer, scripture reading, and devotional practices. These activities serve as the backbone of traditional spiritual formation, fostering spiritual depth and emotional resilience. However, data suggests that there is room for growth in integrating these disciplines with contemporary insights such as neuroplasticity.

Connecting Sanctification and Neuroplasticity

Less than 45% of participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the connection between sanctification and neuroplasticity, indicating a lack of awareness of how scientific insights into brain plasticity could complement spiritual formation. This presents an opportunity for innovation, as it suggests a need for creative frameworks that integrate neuroscience into discipleship models. By bridging sanctification—a fundamental tenet of Wesleyan theology—with neuroplasticity, participants could reshape their spiritual development and reimagine leadership strategies that promote deeper transformation within their ministry teams.

Implications and Recommendations

1. *Targeted Education on Wesleyan Ethos*

Given the unanimous recognition of gaps in Wesleyan theological knowledge, there is an urgent need to develop structured educational initiatives focusing on the Wesleyan tradition. Workshops, reading materials, and guided learning modules would support a deeper understanding and practical application of Wesleyan theology.

2. *Expanding Spiritual Disciplines Through Neuroplasticity*

The 80% engagement rate in spiritual disciplines presents a solid foundation for transformation. However, incorporating neuroplasticity-informed practices such as mindfulness, reflective techniques, and habit-forming approaches could enrich traditional methods and foster a more holistic integration of cognitive science with theology.

3. *Strengthening the Connection Between Neuroscience and Sanctification*

The limited understanding of how neuroplasticity enhances sanctification presents a significant opportunity for growth. Structured educational programs that explicitly connect neuroplasticity with the means of grace, such as prayer and scripture meditation, could help participants internalize sanctification as an ongoing transformative process. To advance this integration, future discipleship models should include neuroscientific insights that illustrate how spiritual disciplines can physically rewire the brain, reinforcing faith-based transformation.

4. Expanding Research and Data Collection

To build upon these findings, future iterations of this project should expand the participant base and implement longitudinal studies. A broader data collection approach would provide richer insights into the long-term effects of integrating neuroplasticity with spiritual formation and Wesleyan theology.

Conclusion

The findings affirm that pastoral leaders exhibit a strong commitment to spiritual formation and an openness to innovative approaches in ministry. However, they also highlight key areas for growth, particularly regarding education in Wesleyan ethos and the integration of neuroplasticity with theological frameworks such as sanctification. By addressing these gaps, the project has the potential to foster deeper spiritual formation, ministerial innovation, and holistic transformation within ecclesiastical communities. The alignment of neuroscientific insights with theological principles could reshape discipleship models, making spiritual growth a measurable and experiential process.

Key Findings and Implications

1. 80% of participants actively engage in spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and scripture reading, forming a strong foundation for spiritual growth. However, integrating contemporary neuroplasticity-informed techniques could further enhance these efforts.

2. 100% of participants recognized knowledge gaps in Wesleyan traditions, underscoring the need for targeted educational initiatives. Addressing this gap would enable leaders to better align their ministries with Wesleyan theological principles.
3. Less than 45% of participants demonstrated a clear understanding of neuroplasticity's relationship to sanctification, highlighting an opportunity for innovation in spiritual formation.
4. Participants expressed a strong interest in integrating mindfulness, theological reflection, and spiritual disciplines, reinforcing the hypothesis that a holistic approach combining cognitive science and spiritual formation fosters resilience, creativity, and spiritual growth.

Final Recommendations

1. Develop structured educational resources on Wesleyan theology, including workshops and reading materials to deepen theological literacy.
2. Introduce training on neuroplasticity and its theological implications, demonstrating how habit-forming spiritual disciplines contribute to sanctification.
3. Expand research efforts through longitudinal studies, allowing for a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of integrating neuroplasticity, sanctification, and spiritual formation.
4. Reimagine discipleship models that emphasize daily engagement with spiritual transformation rather than limiting formation to weekly church services.

5. Incorporate mindfulness, contemplative prayer, and cognitive-behavioral techniques into discipleship frameworks to enhance emotional resilience and spiritual depth.

Final Reflection

This study confirms the powerful intersection between neuroscience and sanctifying theology, demonstrating that spiritual transformation is not merely a theological concept but also a neurobiological reality. By integrating scientific insights into discipleship models, the church has the opportunity to create a more effective, practical, and holistic approach to sanctification, mental health, and spiritual growth. Future implementations should focus on deepening theological engagement, expanding neuroscientific application, and fostering a more interdisciplinary approach to discipleship. These insights will serve as a foundation for continued innovation and spiritual renewal within ecclesiastical communities.

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